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“GRIMDARKNESS, OVER-THE-TOP VIOLENCE, AND HUMOUR”



You can barely swing a Catachan death-feline these days without hitting a Warhammer game – and the sad truth is, a lot of them aren't great. But that only makes it more special when a developer really gets Games Workshop's worlds.

And is there any developer that gets it more than Fatshark? With the

Vermintide series it found the perfect balance of grimdarkness, over-the-top violence, and most importantly absurdity and humour. I couldn't be more excited that they're back to take a crack at 40,000 – and to mix up their co-op formula with even bigger, spikier weapons of war...

ROBIN VALENTINESpecialist in
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Fell in with a bad horde.

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almost certainly going to
make you angry.

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JANUARY 2021

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[MONITOR]

NEWS | OPINION



The pink-haired Seraphine looks similar to Stephanie, and poses in illustrations somewhat like Stephanie's photos with her cat, which she says she sent John in 2019.

COPYCAT?

Woman says **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS** character is based on her, Riot denies it

A woman named Stephanie has alleged that a new *League of Legends* character with a similar appearance and name, Seraphine, is based on her. At the crux of this allegation is her brief relationship with a Riot employee in 2019, who she believes borrowed details from her likeness and life for the popstar from fictional girl group K/DA.

Riot denies the allegation, “Seraphine was independently created by Riot Games and was not based on any individual. Additionally, the former employee [Stephanie] is referring to

left Riot more than a year ago and was in a department and role that has no input whatsoever into the creative design process.”

We omit Stephanie's full name at her and Riot's request. In a Medium post, Stephanie shared texts and recounts her relationship with 'John',

“IT'S BEEN KIND OF HORRID TO HAVE A LEAGUE CHAMPION WHO LOOKS LIKE YOU”

an alias. Stephanie says she and John met twice, and otherwise chatted and played *League* over three months in 2019. When Stephanie visited Riot's LA headquarters for a tour, John produced artwork depicting her as Ahri, which she thought “strange” given how briefly they'd known each other. She adds that John implied he could influence the KD/A project.

Afterwards, Stephanie cancelled future plans to see John and told him he was moving too fast. Then “he ended things and blocked me”.

Roll round to September 2020, and Stephanie was reminded of something John had said: a K/DA surprise revealed on her birthday. On

COMPLETELY BATTY

V:TM BATTLE ROYALE



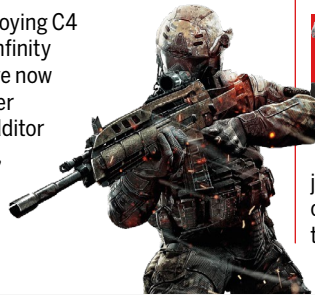
Recently-formed developers Sharkmob are creating a battle royale game based on tabletop RPG *Vampire: The Masquerade*, bewildering fans and non-fans alike. Set to release in 2021, you'll need to collect blood and use your powers to survive the night and be the last man – er, vampire – standing. ■ **RW**

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

WARZONE BOMB DRONE



After months of annoying C4 antics in *Warzone*, Infinity Ward and Raven have now backed the MacGyver approach to explosives. One redditior found a bomb drone in a bunker, seemingly modelled on the DIY version that saw players strap C4 to flying spycams. ■ **JP**

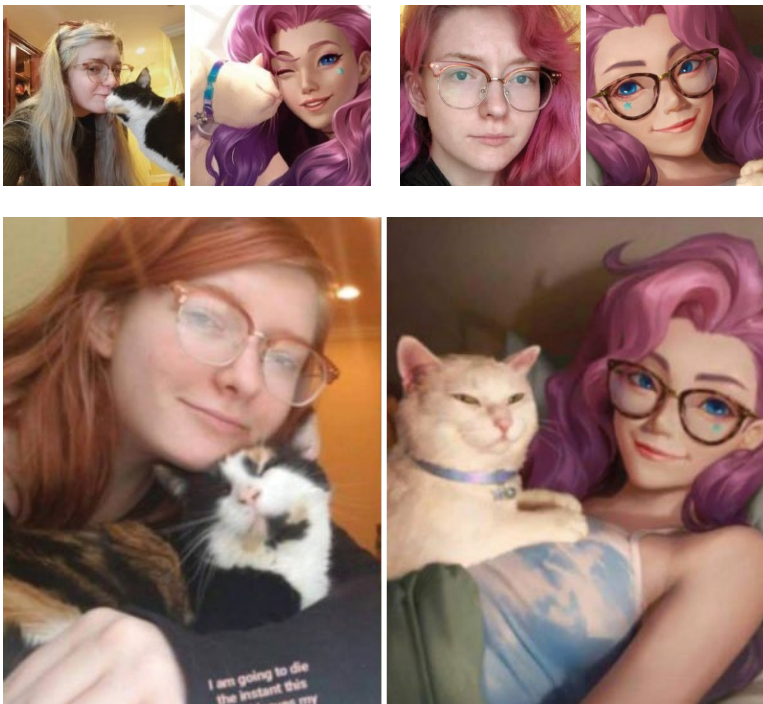


BRAIN WAVES

SOUND BEAMING TECH



Tired of hot ears? You need sound beaming – a technology coming to fruition that allows audio to be beamed from a speaker-like device direct to your brain. Isn't that just called a speaker? No! This is sound only you can hear, and without needing to wear anything on your head. ■ **JR**



TOP: One challenge to this allegation is that Riot senior designer Jeevun Sidhu claims his partner, another employee who goes by Riot Whiskies online, inspired Seraphine's personality. Stephanie acknowledges this and says she doesn't believe Seraphine is based on her.

ABOVE: Stephanie notes that Seraphine comes from regions in *League* lore she wrote an essay about – an essay shared with John, which she claims he printed out and framed in Riot's office.

that day an illustration of Seraphine was posted to the character's Twitter to announce she was 'working' with KD/A. It seemed like more than coincidence.

"I've felt really grossed-out about it, to the point that I can't play one of my favourite videogames," writes Stephanie. "It's been kind of horrid to have a League champion who looks like you, has so many of your characteristics, and has a name that's almost identical to yours. People I've never met send her to me online and point out the similarities, there's already immense amounts of porn of her."

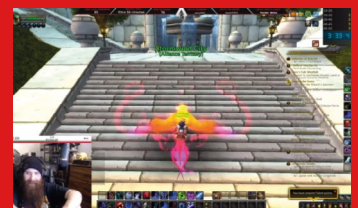
THE LOOK

As for legal options, Michigan State University law professor Brian Kalt says those would likely involve "the tort of right of publicity, also known as appropriation of likeness", which "protects your name or likeness from unwarranted intrusion or exploitation".

Whatever happens legally, it's understandable why Stephanie believes Seraphine is based on her. But there's also a chance this is pure coincidence. If the resemblance is intentional, it seems hard to prove unless someone like John confirms Stephanie was the direct inspiration, and that seems unlikely indeed.

Tyler Wilde

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

World of Warcraft

WoW speedrunner DesMephisto took a Death Knight from level 10 to 50 in 3 hours 33 minutes.

Apex Legends

Respawn has identified 419 top-level players using an exploit to beat up on Bronzers, and banned them.

Mass Effect

A return to *Andromeda*? Who knows, but Bioware is releasing artwork that gives hope for humanity's future.

Among Us

Since the game became a viral hit, Steam has been flooded with knock-offs.

Capcom

The Japanese giant was hit by a huge ransomware attack in November.

Ubisoft Montreal Hoax

Some moron called in a hoax hostage situation at Ubisoft Montreal, and the building was cleared by armed police.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy has finally accepted that the internet is here to stay. Originally, The Spy assumed it was a pointless novelty, in part – The Spy has since learned – due to a coordinated and malicious rickrolling campaign. “All links lead to Astley,” The Spy thought. “This will never catch on.” And

yet it appears The Spy was wrong; such was the people’s need for an on-demand source of Never Gonna Give You Up. And also it turns out that other websites did actually exist. The Spy isn’t clear on the details.

After briefly catching up on the last decade of online trends, The Spy took the obvious next step of figuring out how to utilise this tool for The Spy’s own personal gain at the expense of others. Unfortunately cybercrime is trickier than American police procedurals make it seem. The Spy tried all the tricks: creating a GUI interface using Visual Basic; isolating the node and dumping them on the other side of the router; even recruiting a sadsack office drone to share The Spy’s keyboard during high-pressure hack-offs. None of it worked.

The Spy is undeterred, though, and has already checked out a book about piracy from the local library in the hope of learning how to download a copy of Hackers – a film The Spy can only assume is the



THE SPY
The Spy will never tweet a fleet.

THE LEAK ALSO HAD DETAILS OF A NEW GAME, CODENAMED SHIELD

canonical text of the entire subculture. Clearly others have seen it already, as proven by a recent attack on Capcom.

HACK’S OFF TO YA

In November, Capcom was hit by a ransomware attack that “affected access to certain systems, including email and file servers”. Later, a reported 60GB of the over 1TB of bank statements, tax documents, business information, and contracts the hackers claimed to have downloaded was leaked to 4chan. While it’s hard to confirm the veracity of this information, IGN cited sources “close to Capcom” who claimed that many were the genuine thing.

If true, the data reveals plenty about Capcom’s upcoming plans, including a release date for *Resident Evil Village*. While it was known that the next major game in the series would be arriving next year, the leak narrows the launch window to late April.

If zombies aren’t your thing, how about monsters? According to the leak, *Monster Hunter Rise* and *Monster Hunter Stories 2* will also arrive on PC. The latter is the sequel to the turn-based RPG in which you hatch and befriend monsters, *Pokémon*-style. Aimed at a younger audience than the main series, the first game launched to somewhat disappointing sales back in 2017. If the leak is accurate, the PC version of the sequel will launch simultaneously with the Switch release in June 2021.

Monster Hunter Rise, meanwhile, is the next proper game in the series, following the hugely successful *Monster Hunter World*. It’s set to feature new monsters and apparently it will release on PC in October 2021.

The leak also had details of a new game, codenamed *Shield*. Supposedly a shooter featuring a campaign, multiplayer, raids, and even base defence, it sounds like a throw-everything-at-the-wall kind of project. hilariously, the translated document even includes a business plan around utilising streamers, which notes that “contract fees

are extremely high and it’s likely that the streamer will stop playing as soon as the contract expires”. The Spy is heartened to learn that we’re all still trying to figure out the internet. ■

The Spy

This month in... 2010



1 *EVE Online* was over seven years old at the time of this cover feature, but PC gaming has always been a space where games could thrive long after they were unleashed on the world. And thrive *EVE* did, generating countless fascinating stories about intrigue, betrayal and full-scale space war. Even now, 17 years after its release, it’s an essential story generator.

ISSUE
222, January 2011
ON THE COVER
EVE Online
IN THE CINEMA
TRON: Legacy

2 The first *Black Ops* game was “let down by bad scripting, glitchy multiplayer and dull firefights,” claimed our review. Hopefully *Cold War* fares better...



3 *Minecraft* was our 2010 Game of the Year, which seems obvious in hindsight, but it’s worth remembering that it was still in Alpha at the time. Despite that, after a year of discovery, of creation, of communities sharing amazing builds and mods and tools, it was a phenomenon worth celebrating. As with *EVE*, it remains relevant today. Great games never die.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



The London skyline, as furnished by Orbx's premium city pack.

HACK THE PLANET

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR modders imagining a better Earth

Microsoft *Flight Simulator's* version of Earth is a marvel. Satellite data from Bing Maps (hey, someone's got to use it) interpreted by Microsoft's Azure AI platform creates an approximation of our planet, all 200 million square miles of it. The result is a feat of engineering to rival the real-life aircraft you fly over it – an evolutionary leap from Google Earth, exactly the world tourism simulator we all need right now. Except when it's not.

Drop beneath the clouds, and you may notice the generic office buildings that replaced iconic landmarks such as the Washington Monument and Buckingham Palace. Or the Brazilian airfield swallowed by a mile-deep chasm. Or the 2,000-foot monolith piercing the skies of Melbourne, apparently the result of a typo in OpenStreetMap, a source that Bing Maps itself pulls data from.

These (often hilarious) errors grabbed headlines and became in-game tourist attractions in their own right. But they're not the only gaps on *Flight Sim's* globe, as anyone who's discovered a flat texture where their home town should be will tell you. "It's great outside of cities, where all you need is rather rough heightmap and ground textures with decent resolution, and satellite images are enough," says Ilya Perapechka, a software engineer and a

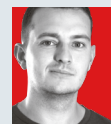
key part of the *Flight Sim* community on Reddit, where he goes by the username 'Jonahex111'.

When it comes to those urban centres, much more detail is required. *Flight Sim* uses 3D-scanned photogrammetry where possible – but Bing's library only covers around 400 cities, most of them located in the USA. "For all the other cities, towns and villages in the world, 3D models of buildings are automatically generated by neural algorithms developed by Blackshark.ai. This is better than nothing, but far from good."

Living in Minsk, this is something that Perapechka knows all too well. "There is no photogrammetry for my country ... and the quality of autogenerated buildings is quite poor," he says. "But I was ready for it. The real disappointment was when I flew to London." It's not just the Queen's gaff that gets a rough deal there – many of the capital's bridges are submerged in the Thames, while the Gherkin, a skyscraper that looks like the result of procedural generation IRL, is entirely absent.

For a location as frequently visited as this, you've got options. On launch day there was already a London city pack available for purchase from Orbx, which offers handcrafted versions of the famous skyline.

Microsoft is gradually expanding on its work with free updates that take on one country, and a few of its most prominent cities and landmarks, at a time. But what about



How to

If you fancy trying out some of these creations yourself, flightsim.to is the place to start. Its scenery repository is already over 1,000 packs strong – just pick the one you want, download and unzip into the game's Community folder. Finding that folder this is the trickiest part of the process. You can find plenty of guides online, but for me, the folder was inexplicably on the top level of my hard drive.



FAR LEFT: Revisiting my university campus, thanks to FlyingTheston's Birmingham UK pack, was a quietly emotional experience.



LOWER LEFT: Before and after shots of High_Frame_Rates' Melbourne Cricket Ground.

WEIRD WORLD *The most existentially troubling spots on Flight Sim's algorithmic Earth*



THE MELBOURNE ANOMALY
The one that started it all – a 212-storey omen that, when the Combine come for Earth, Australia will be first.



THE BENEVENTO TWIN
But it's not alone. Rising out of the Italian countryside, this tower is too eldritch for its peaceful surroundings.



THE JAPANESE DEATH SPIKES
Located in the Saga prefecture, these spines appear to be... oh God... organic in nature? Horrifying.



THE LAGOA NOVA PIT
You can take off from the airstrip at the bottom of this chasm, but be warned: physics get a little weird down there.

the rest of the world? That's where the modding community comes in. The FS2020Creation subreddit is a bustling swap-shop packed with homebrewed cities, airports and natural wonders. And while some are the result of modders applying their 3D modelling skills, there's another approach that accounts for the majority of these creations. Bing isn't the only source of publicly available photogrammetry for cities.

Google has its own bank, used for Google Maps, and "its coverage is much better than in Bing Maps", explains Perapechka, who says the quality of imagery is also better. The community quickly found a way of 'slurping' data from Google Maps, feeding it into Blender's modelling tools and back into the game – Perapechka has made this even simpler with his Google Earth Decoder tool. "People were spending weeks to rip just a few square kilometres. So I decided to make something better, something where you can just select region on map, press 'download', and voila."

IS IT A BIRD?

One of the most prolific modders working with this slurped data is known as 'High_Frame_Rates' in the community. "I've never done any kind of modding to this extent in other videogames," he says – but just a few days after *Flight Sim*'s launch, having taken a test flight around his native Australia and noticing a lot of missing landmarks, he got to work. Since then, he's uploaded versions of Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane.

Seeing its own community switch to Google data is perhaps a little embarrassing for Microsoft, given *Flight Sim* is, in part, a showcase for its tools and platforms. But it hasn't discouraged modders yet, and the ones I speak to are unconcerned about any issues – at least, not from Microsoft's side. "Since day one there has been talk about this breaking Google's Terms of Service, which it may very well," High_Frame_Rates says. The 3D imagery they're using is commercial, and not intended to be used in this way – but there have been no cease-and-desists yet, and the general consensus is that Google isn't too worried about some gamers demonstrating its product's

superiority over the competition. "I think the only real concern is anyone trying to use Google's photogrammetry scenery and profit off of it – that's when Google will probably have a problem with it."

Instead, Perapechka sees a bright future for *Flight Sim* modding. He's currently researching autogeneration to replace Microsoft's own processes. He believes that by implementing neural post-processing methods, it should be possible to automatically create more detailed cities. "Of course, you can say that just one software engineer cannot do something better than Microsoft, but recent research papers make me think that it's possible. Moreover, communities often implement better features than original developers," he says. Flying over yet another of High_Frame_Rates' reworked cities, it's hard to disagree. ■
Alex Spencer

"PEOPLE WERE SPENDING WEEKS TO RIP JUST A FEW SQUARE KILOMETRES"

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

FAR OUT

How **THE SIMS** shaped the career of *Far Cry* director Alex Hutchinson

It's hard to imagine a more prestigious PC gaming university than Maxis in 2008. When an industry fresher named Alex Hutchinson joined the *Spore* team, he was introduced to *Civilization IV* designer Soren Johnson, *SpyParty* creator Chris Hecker, and producer extraordinaire Lucy Bradshaw – who *Fortune* would later name one of the ten most powerful women in gaming. Presiding over it all was *SimCity* genius and walking TED talk Will Wright.

"It was a very big learning curve, working with some of the smartest people I've even seen," Hutchinson recalls. "There were all these luminaries from the business, which for a 20-something Australian was pretty exciting."

As it turned out, though, Maxis was a better environment for learning than it was for building games. Despite its acquisition by EA, the success of *The Sims* had insulated the studio from publisher influence that might have given it tighter structure and goals.

"There were endless fascinating discussions with people about the role of videogames and the purpose of mechanics," Hutchinson says. "I was exposed to all kinds of new ways to think about games. The downside was that getting through those debates was time-consuming and exhausting – everyone had very strong opinions, and a forceful idea of where *Spore* should go and how it should be."

Wright wasn't always around to mediate, and the finished *Spore* bore the marks of that indecision. It wasn't one game but several, of varying quality, taped together. Ultimately it hasn't been *Spore* that's defined Hutchinson's career, but his least high-profile work at Maxis – working to adapt *The Sims* for consoles.

"For a while they were trying to make the brand more palatable for what they thought a console audience wanted," he says. "They'd added objectives and locations with fixed characters. But when we got to *The Sims 2*, it occurred to me that perhaps we should try as earnestly as possible to be true to the experience."

It's an attitude that's since become the prevailing one – to launch PC games across multiple platforms without compromise, eschewing the

notion that console players are stupid or impatient. Hutchinson later took that perspective to Ubisoft, where he headed up *Assassin's Creed III* and *Far Cry 4*.

KILLING WITH COMEDY

"The one throughline of my career is the idea that the player's narrative is more important than the game's narrative," he explains. "Allowing room for player expression, making that as wide as possible and celebrating their decisions. That was always something that Soren and Will were excited by, and I think that probably infected my thinking."

With *Far Cry*, Hutchinson inherited a bleak message embedded in the series by a fellow Ubisoft game director, Clint Hocking: the idea that the player couldn't really change anything for the better with a loaded gun. "Clint's an old friend," Hutchinson says, "and a very serious man".

Hutchinson's own instinct was different: to embrace the black comedy of a man murdering his way across Kyrat so that he could bury his mother's ashes. For him, *Far Cry* was best handled with a weary smirk.

"I'd become so exhausted by linear shooter narratives about how shooting people is bad," he says. "The only way I could get through rewriting the script was to make it a big joke – the idea that a person would fly to a warzone for any other reason than to get involved in a war. I liked the idea that we could make this big systemic soup, and then the narrative we did build would be a commentary on how that narrative was essentially farcical."

Small wonder, then, that since leaving Ubisoft, Hutchinson has leaned into the systemic side of *Far Cry* – rejecting story to focus on discovery, aggressive wildlife, and organic encounters between AI. That was the pitch for *Journey to the Savage Planet*, which Hutchinson built with an independent team before joining Google Stadia last Christmas.

"We're working on new games," he says. "It's the last thing I haven't ever tried, which is to be first-party. Google is very new to the games business, which is exciting. They haven't got any historical assumptions about how games are made, so that can be challenging, but also it's a positive." ■

Jeremy Peel



VACUUM DREAMER

Five features from
Hutchinson's cancelled
Ubisoft space game, *Pioneer*

1
NON-VIOLENCE

2
ZERO-GRAVITY

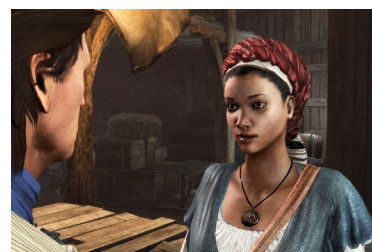
3
SMALL, DETAILED STATIONS

4
TRUE
3D SPACE

5
REALISTIC
PROBLEMS



**“THE PLAYER’S NARRATIVE
IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN
THE GAME’S NARRATIVE”**



LEFT: *Assassin's Creed III's* homestead shares a clockwork domesticity with *The Sims*.



LOWER LEFT: *Far Cry 4's* Pagan Min was an ugly reflection of the player.

DNA Tracing

GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

ROMERO HAD QUIT OVER
FRUSTRATION WITH
CARMACK'S BELIEF THAT
TECH SHOULD COME FIRST

DOOM SCROLL

How id Software reclaimed its history by losing its leaders

In the early days, id Software was all about ego. It wasn't unique in that regard: like practically all of its contemporaries, id was founded by kids of the late '70s and early '80s, for whom game development had started as a bedroom hobby. Without university courses or internships, theirs had been a self-directed education – driven by the thrill of getting light to move across a screen.

Knowledge was shared, through computer clubs and magazines, but games of the time were not made through teamwork – instead they were the godlike act of an individual typing the most efficient, creative and accurate code into an Apple II keyboard.

Thanks to the accessibility and simplicity of the tech, John Romero had developed dozens of published games before working on *Wolfenstein 3D*. His story was no exception – id's other founding members, John Carmack, Adrian Carmack (no relation) and Tom Hall, had each spent their most formative decade in self-imposed solitary confinement, programming game after game.

It's no surprise, then, that this history seeped into the culture of the studio. Though id Software worked together to create *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom* and *Quake*, its process wasn't exactly collaborative by today's standards. In the beginning, John Carmack would work solo to develop the next innovation in 3D graphics and AI. Then Romero and his fellow designers would build stages alone, placing every door, light and monster by hand.

SINGLE PLAYER

That autonomy defines the flavour of early id games: every level has an author, and reflects their personalities. While Romero favoured firepower and flow, you could tell a Sandy Petersen creation by its scant resources and Lovecraftian horror. Throughout, the tricks and secrets of a *Doom* level ensured you felt the presence of its designer.

But that individualism had its downsides.

Communication broke down within id as the team burned out on the protracted development of *Quake*. Romero left to form Ion Storm, and the remaining founders never seemed to rebuild their rapport. Working in separate offices, they made *Quake III* as a multiplayer-only game – allowing them to effectively work together, but apart.

Romero had quit over frustration with John Carmack's belief that tech should come first, not play. And in the *Doom* designer's absence, that approach came to shape the company, for good and ill. With nobody left to challenge and redirect Carmack's focus, the id releases of this middle period were showcases for his genius – moreso than they were enjoyable shooters.

Doom 3 doubled down on the potential for horror Petersen had discovered, and boasted some bold

design touches – namely the controversial flashlight that required you to put away your weapon in order to clear the corners of its Mars research facility. But its slower pace and cramped corridors prioritised Carmack's distinctive stencil shadowing over fun. For a year or two, *Doom 3* screenshots were inescapable in the pages of this magazine, and promised an impossibly moody future for PC gaming that was

BELOW: Can't shoot a Pinky in the face any more – they're armoured up front.

BOTTOM: Marty Stratton worked on id's *Quake* team before rebooting *Doom*.

TERMS OF EN-TEAR-MENT

How to refer to *Doom*'s protagonist

"DOOM MARINE"

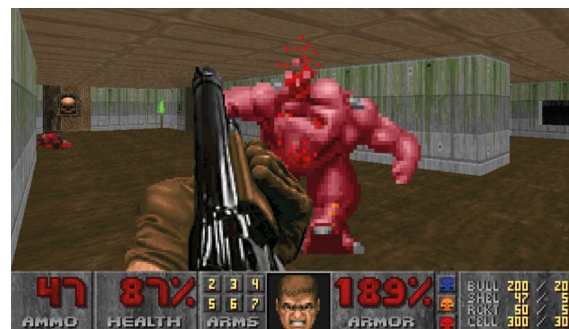
Grounded, human, American. But is he American? He never speaks, so we can't be sure.

"DOOMGUY"

Overfamiliar and, frankly, disrespectful. This 'guy' could beat you to death with your own arm.

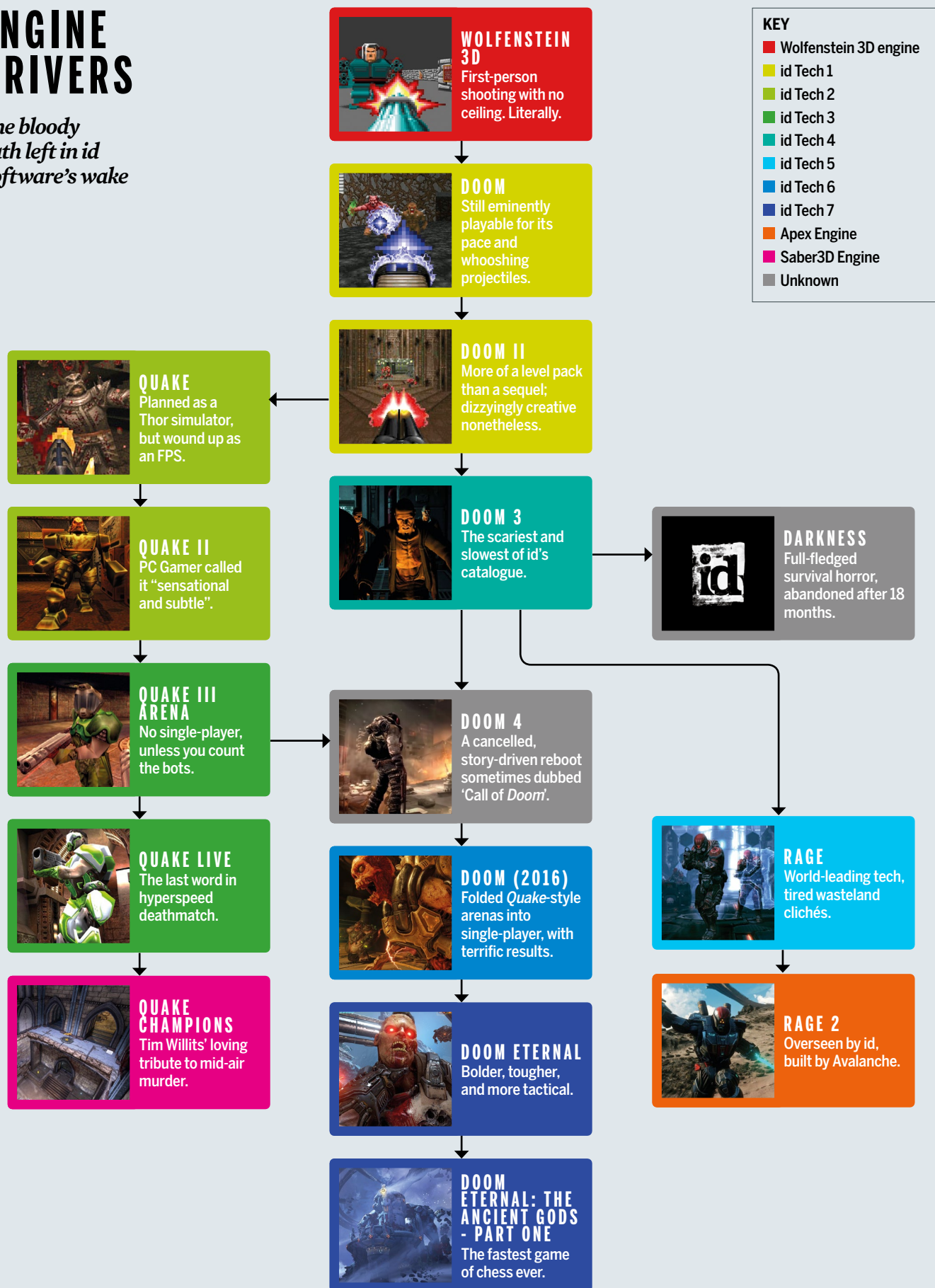
"DOOM SLAYER"

It's high fantasy, it's heavy metal. It's a bit daft and pretentious. It's modern *Doom*.



ENGINE DRIVERS

The bloody path left in id Software's wake



» undeniably exciting. But inevitably, the graphics have faded, and the game's shadow doesn't loom quite so large these days.

ALL-SEEING EYE

The problem became more profound by the time *Rage* launched in 2011. For id's ambitious Mad Max tribute, Carmack invented a texture streaming system that would enable every surface in the game to look unique – but players without high-end hardware understandably complained when textures failed to load in on time, compromising the complete first-person immersion that had once made *Doom* so alluring.

When Carmack ultimately left to head up technology at Oculus – pursuing the same holodeck dream that had powered his obsession with 3D engines in the '90s – it turned out to be a mercy. With the last big ego out of the building, id was finally free to remould itself as a collaborative studio for the modern age – where triple-A shooters are made by teams of hundreds, not individuals.

Doom 2016 was the result of that soul-searching: a rebirth which reclaimed the speed and ferocity of Romero-era id, yet freed itself from the compulsion to push technology forward. The new *Doom* looked good, of course, but it had no headline innovation that might sell new graphics cards. Instead, the genius was all design: the way id reimaged the combat arena as a spinning whirlpool, with you right in the centre, fighting to keep your head above water. *Eternal* only went further, turning *Doom* into a constant fight for resources, in which enemies were as much food as they were foe. Where once id was accused of creating dumb fun, it now asked for mind-frying concentration.

RAW FURY

The game that exemplifies contemporary id Software is one not entirely its own. For *Rage 2*, the company relinquished day-to-day development duties to Avalanche



LEFT: *Rage 2*'s vehicular exploration is oddly reminiscent of *Brütal Legend*.

Studios, the *Just Cause* developer which simply had the better technology for making open worlds – an admission you could never imagine id making in Carmack's day. Studio creative director Tim Willits would regularly sit down with Avalanche's designers, in sessions the team dubbed 'Willits University', to impart id's wisdom on level building and pacing. He taught that a shotgun shouldn't sound like a shotgun – it needs to boom like a cannon.

You can feel id Software's influence in the calm, female tannoy that tells you when all hostiles have been eliminated from an area, and thus the doors can unlock. You can hear it in the guitar amp hum of your car when it's nearby. But it's most apparent in the combat, which pushes you to close the gap on enemies for extra health; of all

ETERNAL ONLY WENT FURTHER, TURNING DOOM INTO A CONSTANT FIGHT FOR RESOURCES

Doom 2016's innovations, the least appreciated is that it has made melee irresistible in first-person.

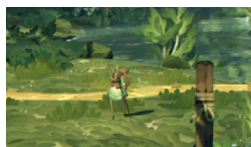
The key resource in *Rage 2*'s world is named 'feltrite', and that pun is a pithy summary of id Software's guiding philosophy. Though the studio didn't touch *Rage 2*'s code directly, the game's battles are imbued with *Doom*-feel. It's proof that id's magic can be taught – that its power now lies in collective knowledge and company best practice, not the hands of a few precious individuals. ■

Jeremy Peel



PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
Might and DelightPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
mightanddelight.com

BOOK OF TRAVELS

Adventure in a world where
you're not forced to be the hero

I love playing the role of the wanderer in games, but it's pretty difficult to explore virtual worlds without some bloodthirsty monster trying to kill me. It is too much to ask to quietly traverse *The Witcher 3*'s Novigrad, collecting herbs and picking plants, without a ferocious wolf trying to gnaw my arm off?

I'm down for fisticuffs more often than not, but there are moments when I just want to explore and take it all in. Thankfully, Might and Delight has come to my rescue with *Book of Travels*, an upcoming RPG that embraces this wanderer philosophy.

Self-described as a "collaborative and friendly roleplaying experience", there are no linear quests or nagging plotlines. Players are free to explore the handcrafted world of Braided Shore at their own pace. Might and Delight describes it as a TMO, a 'tiny multiplayer online' game, with a focus on exploration and companionship, two themes that the studio is more than familiar with.

"Making the *Shelter* games taught us how to evoke strong emotions and how to make simple things matter," Might and Delight's art director, Jakob Tuchten explains. "We felt we had stumbled upon many unique and interesting multiplayer mechanics that seemed to make people interact and roleplay in really friendly and creative ways, mechanics we wanted to develop further."

Book of Travels will be Might and Delight's first Early Access title, and after a successful Kickstarter with 7,000 backers, the team is more than eager to get the community involved in the development process.

"We see ourselves a bit like a dungeon master," Tuchten explains. "We want to emulate what the community wants,

taking into account what secrets they like, the direction of the game, and which storylines they react to. We want to tailor the game's future to both match that and to also challenge perceptions people have in the game."

PAGE TURNER

Book of Travels is definitely challenging perceptions. Might and Delight has been more than happy to celebrate that *Book of Travels* is not your traditional MMORPG. Many of the story beats that guide the player through a fantasy world have been set aside. With no overarching goal, no real beginning or end, you are the one in charge of shaping your own journey.

"Our world is serene," Tuchten says. "It's not plagued by an evil monster or a bad king. It doesn't have that cliché dark fantasy storyline where everything is about to go to hell, and you're the focal point of trying to set it right."

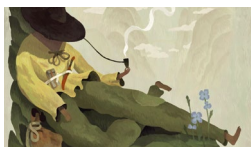
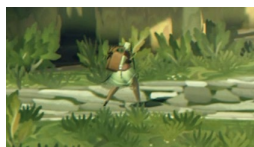
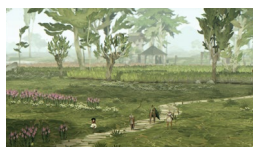
But just because *Book of Travels*' world has a peaceful cadence, it doesn't mean Might and Delight has scrapped all means of conflict. Tuchten explains how entering a fight with monsters is a serious event with consequences. The team's still deciding the exact mechanics, but promise that encounters will often be traumatic and have an emotional aftermath – not something to take lightly.

"We have the opportunity to actually do combat that is meaningful," Tuchten explains. "When it happens, it involves risk and has a dramatic impact on your character. We debated for a long time whether combat should be a part of the world at all, but we want to convey the serenity or the calmness of the world, and that needed to be accentuated by having a danger just outside of the road."

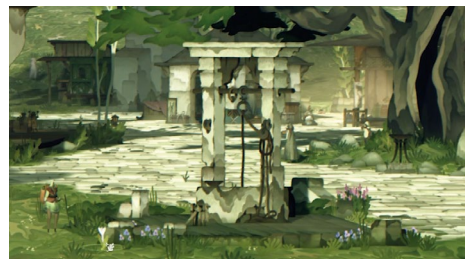
Roads wind between important locations, but every wanderer knows what lies off the beaten path is worth discovering too, even if danger lies in the wilds. Luckily you'll have plenty of skills and abilities to help you explore, and just like combat, Might and Delight has

FIRST
LOOKENTERING A FIGHT WITH
MONSTERS IS A SERIOUS
EVENT WITH CONSEQUENCES

Book of Travels



Stick to the main roads and paths for safety.



Braided Shore has a painterly style to its gorgeous visuals



approached these RPG elements in its own unique way.

"There is a sort of levelling-up system, but it's not tailored to the same sort of framework as normal MMOs. It's based around skill slots," Tuchten says. "As you progress through the game, you'll get more empty slots for learned skills you get from the world. You may have ten skills but only three slots, and each one takes up a certain amount of space. For example, a powerful skill, like the ability to transfer into an animal, would take up five skill slots."

Skills are not something you learn automatically, but through teachings from the world's characters. If you want to learn how to fish, you'll need to seek out a fisherman. Same with tea brewing and knot tying – the two major magical practices in *Book of Travels*. Knots hold short-term magical abilities that when untied provide a short burst of magic (such as teleporting to the other side of a river), whereas teas have long-term magical properties, but must be carefully brewed while sitting next to a fire.

Abilities can be heightened with choices you make in the character creation process by choosing talents, backstories, and personality traits. You can be a carefree traveller who grew up in the mountains, a historian seeking to discover Braided Shore's lost past, or a mysterious cloaked outlaw with a knack for the magical arts. It's refreshing to see a character creator that puts the focus on things other than combat ability.

"The biggest thing for me personally is that we have developed a game design surrounding roleplaying freedom," Tuchten says. "Because of the game's open-ended design, you're not forced to be a hero, which to us makes the roleplay aspects so much greater."

QUIET COMPANIONS

One particular mechanic that makes Might and Delight's game collection unique is that they create meaningful ways of communicating without using any words or dialogue. Creating companionship through wordless interactions has always been a key theme in Might and Delight's games: the unspoken bond between an animal

mother and her cubs in the *Shelter* games, the friendship between a bear and a lynx cub in *Paws*, and *Tiny Echo's* silent spirit delivering mail to a community.

In *Book of Travels*, NPCs will speak to you in little dialogue bubbles but you and your party can only communicate through symbols and emotes. It's an idea the studio explored in their first MMO, *Meadow*, where it created some surprising meaningful player bonds.

You don't have to buddy up with others though, *Book of Travels* lets you be a lone wolf if you want. You can go off and have your own adventure, following story leads and uncovering mysteries on your own. There is a wealth of lore under *Book of Travels's* fairy-tale surface for players to dive into – if they so choose. It's completely up to you.

One storyline kicks off in one of the game's cities, Casa. It acts as the starting point for adventure when you first begin the game and it didn't play out like I expected. "There's been a murder in the city," Tuchten says. "A mythical creature called a Sepra, which is what we call the genies of this world, has been murdered, and that's never happened before. There's a mystery surrounding how it died and how it's affected the politics of the city."

As serene as *Book of Travels* world may seem, Might and Delight wants the world's cities to be like the metropolises of the real world – neither good or bad but somewhere in the middle. Settlements are going to be bustling with activity and are supposed to make the player feel somewhat overwhelmed.

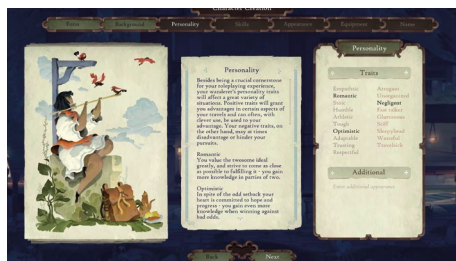
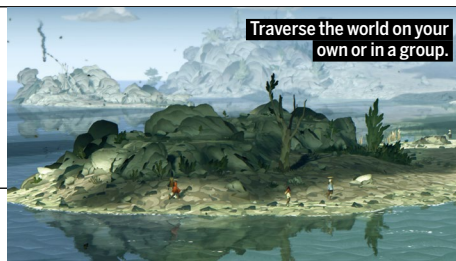
The world of Braided Shore looks stunning. It has Might and Delight's signature visuals, but this time on a grand scale. It may look 2D, but there's plenty of depth and, as you explore each area, layers of the scene fade in and out of the foreground, like a delicate paper theatre.

Book of Travels has taken traditional aspects of online RPGs and reimagined them in a very Might and Delight way. And, from the overwhelming success of the Kickstarter campaign, both fans and those not familiar with the studio's work have been spellbound by the strange, whimsical idea of a serene RPG.

It's not often a game gives you the opportunity to embody the archetype of a wanderer, but Might and Delight seems to be on track with *Book of Travels*. It's a whole world designed for those who want to let their curiosity guide them, and that's pretty special.

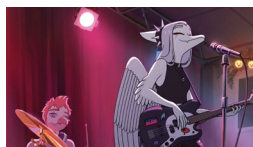
Rachel Watts

IT HAS MIGHT AND DELIGHT'S SIGNATURE VISUALS, BUT THIS TIME ON A GRAND SCALE



PREVIEW

Goodbye Volcano High



Volcano High, before saying goodbye.



Tails round the campfire.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2021

DEVELOPER
KO_OP

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
goodbyevolcanohigh.com

GOODBYE VOLCANO HIGH

It's time to play triceratops trumps

You'd be forgiven for thinking that, of the many things a game about dinosaurs that go to high school is likely to be, 'relatable' isn't one of them. Yet you would be wrong. Despite the dinos, this is set to be a game that tells a deep, surprisingly human story.

Goodbye Volcano High is a narrative adventure game. The player drops in when graduation is on the horizon and the protagonist, Fang, needs to make a decision about where they want their life to go. "What this game is really about," says Saleem Dabbous, studio director and *Goodbye Volcano High* co-director, "is asking yourselves, if you knew everything was going to come to an end, what would you do with that time? What are the choices that you would make? And who would you want to be?"

KO_OP isn't quite ready to go into great detail about how the game will play, but it's keen to stress that player choice will be important. Things go much deeper than 'path A or path B', as co-director and animation director Kyle McKernan explains: "There's [a] choice of pursuing newer things versus your really close friendships or relationships, or your family, or your music, it all interweaves and adds up as the story goes on."

Ah yes, the music. The audio will be an important part of *Goodbye Volcano High* ("we think audio and music is what makes an emotional lasting connection," says Dabbous). Fang is in a band, VVORM

"WE THINK AUDIO AND MUSIC IS WHAT MAKES AN EMOTIONAL LASTING CONNECTION"

DRAMA, with their best friend Trish – and their music will be featured in the game. The idea of potentially prioritising the band over personal relationships is certainly a very interesting one.

It's the nature of KO_OP as an artist-owned and -run studio, though, which gives *Goodbye Volcano High* its true heart. There have been no barriers to infusing the game with the identities of the people who made it. "[KO_OP is] made up of a lot of queer people, and a lot of trans people," says Dabbous. "We're able to have those elements be a part of the world and the story and the characters ... we don't have to fight for that, and we don't have to necessarily centre that either. They're just a part of our world as a given."

THIS IS THE END

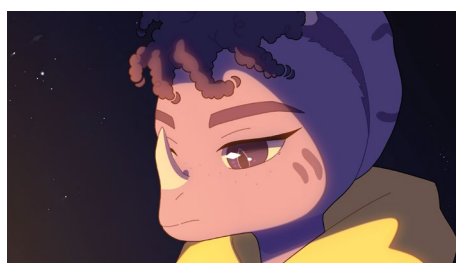
Development began in 2018, and the idea was always to give the story something of an apocalyptic vibe. The end of an era in terms of graduation from high school; the fact that the characters are dinosaurs, which as we know went extinct; the pressures of making important life choices... stress, endings, and the unknown were always in the mix. And then, 2020 happened.

"Since [2018] things [have become] more and more dire, in terms of just like our political climate, our ecological crisis," explains Dabbous. "There's a lot of things out there that feel like these looming huge issues that are almost cataclysmic, right? And we're just like, OK, what is our responsibility as creators to tell narratives that capture this feeling in time? ... I think that we're trying to ask ourselves, like, what does it mean to exist at the end of an era? What does it look like? And what is your personal responsibility?"

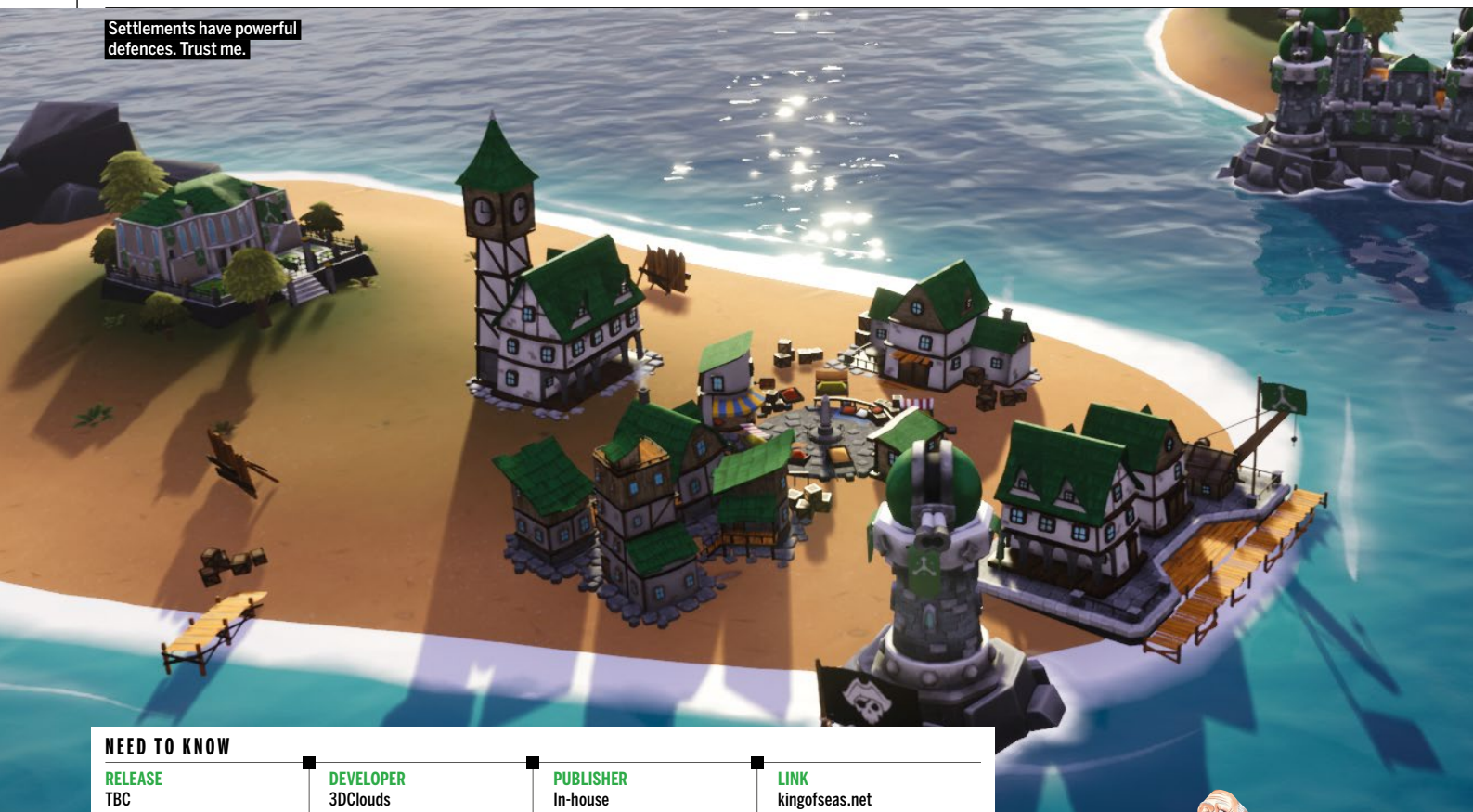
The coronavirus pandemic has proven to be an instructive lesson in how humans react to cataclysmic events (for good or bad), but it also means, as Dabbous puts it, "We have to make sure that it's not read as a straight COVID [commentary]." McKernan adds, "I think that a really interesting balance to try to strike, is that we're trying to treat the subject as responsibly as we can and with as much weight as it warrants, while still having our own kind of world."

Luke Kemp

NEW
INFO



Settlements have powerful defences. Trust me.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
3DClouds

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
kingofseas.net

KING OF SEAS

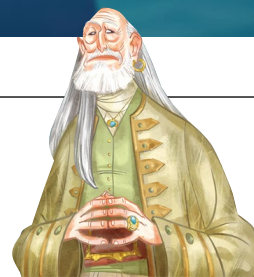
Looking like hot ship, flagging this one now

Pirate. Game. Not that kind. If you're anything like me, those two words are enough to generate excitement (the concept) and despair (recent examples) in equal measure. By concentrating on sailing, and ensuring that it doesn't take itself *too* seriously, *King of Seas* seems to be setting course for success.

PLAYED
IT

Considering the fact that your character is something of a reluctant pirate – you play as the son or daughter of the king of the seas, framed for his murder – you don't wait long to start causing chaos, graduating from delivery person to merchant murderer with amusing speed.

My first truly piracy objective is to sink three merchant ships. The preview build is limited to 45 minutes of play, and each time I run through, I never seem to have enough time to sink the required number with my modest little sloop. This is partly because, as the map doesn't mark the positions of any nearby ships, I spend



most of the remaining time trying to find targets; often before being sunk by a nautical shopkeeper. I'm more Threeewood than Blackbeard.

Is my difficulty in finding merchants linked to the fact that this ARPG is procedurally generated? Perhaps. But it's already clear that this will be a game where joy is found in wandering around, doing your own thing. I'm more than happy picking up wayward crates and looting wrecked ships, levelling up and discovering new equipment for my boat. Bigger ships will be available to buy, and I'm salivating at the prospect of having ten cannons rather than just two.

On my small ship, each of the three sails is raised or lowered one at a time with a button tap, a little touch I love which also

makes tight turns in battle easy (and a little tense). The combat is pretty simple, but enjoyable. Timing shots is important – cannons take a while to load, don't you know – and there are gloriously unrealistic abilities to be had. In this early build alone, I nab a flamethrower for roasting other ships and a sort of magical cloud that briefly interferes with aiming.

BOOTY CALL

Oddly enough, you can't rotate the camera, but you can zoom it in and out a bit, which proves important when it comes to being aware of your surroundings (or just appreciating the pretty graphics). This feeds into the social dynamics, whereby the pirates both trade with settlements and raid their merchants. Attack a trading ship too close to port however, and that community will (understandably) refuse to trade with you. Buying and selling prices vary across the sea, so it literally pays to keep everybody onside. It'll be possible to conquer areas, though, so I look forward to punishing anybody who dares to cross me.

Luke Kemp

I'M SALIVATING AT THE PROSPECT OF HAVING TEN CANNONS RATHER THAN JUST TWO



FURY OF DRACULA

DIGITAL EDITION

29/10/2020

Evil is returning to Europe, as the iconic gothic board game of social deduction is faithfully resurrected on PC.



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Now, imagine all this is on fire.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
January, 2021

DEVELOPER
Rockfish Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
everspace.game

EVERSPACE 2

Be nice to Freelancers, they may come back with homing missiles

When you start up a free-roaming space shooter, the last thing you expect is to be flying down a tight and twisting tunnel, in search of something called the 'core'. There are anemone-like creatures all over the walls, and they fall easily to your ship's lasers.

PLAYED IT

You don't even know who you are at this point, referred to as just 'the wingman' on comms, but once you've defended the core, and the miners trying to exploit it, from a giant drill that lets in angry drones, you'll be slightly closer to finding out.

This is the closed beta of *Everspace 2*, the final stage before its Early Access release in January. The game is running from the gravity well of *Cyberpunk 2077*, rescheduling from a December release that saw CD Projekt's own delay threaten to crush it. The other side of Christmas, the theory is, it can shine.

And there's no reason why it shouldn't. While the prototype build looked like a

game, but revealed that it wasn't when you picked away at the surface, the beta has more ships, more characters, more plot, more infinity. The voices are provided by a text-to-speech app right now before the voice-acting is added, and sound like you're being lectured by jerky robots, but the game has something extra: it hangs together right now as a scripted experience rather than a collection of disparate areas in space.

A SHOT IN THE DARK

Freelancer, from 2003, is still very much the reference, but while that game tended toward long wheeling dogfights where the objective was to get on your opponent's tail and stay there, in *Everspace 2* there's always something in the way – be it an

CUTTING BEAMS FILL THE VOID, THE TRAILS OF MISSILES BURNING TOWARD THEIR TARGET

asteroid or the rotting superstructure of a long-abandoned industrial facility. The ability to move vertically up and down plays into this, making it possible to hide and pop up to surprise your target – particularly useful when hunting defence turrets or getting close enough to a jammer to disable it. Bandit craft and their drones scatter everywhere, leaving threat markers spread across your HUD. Long cutting beams fill the void, the red trails of missiles burning toward targets, and if you've got the right gun equipped you can join in with the light show, dazzling pink projectiles arcing toward enemy ships.

And while the voices may be placeholder, the glorious cosmic backgrounds, crystalline caves and floating wreckage – as well as the chunky fighters you pilot – are looking extremely good. Special mention too for the sparse cutscenes rendered to look like paintings.

Rockfish Games' decision to delay is a positive one, then: a launch with more polish at a dry time of year, avoiding the gravitational waves of a big release, could be exactly what the game needs.

Ian Evenden

TRIBUTE

PANZER PALADIN

ENGAGING
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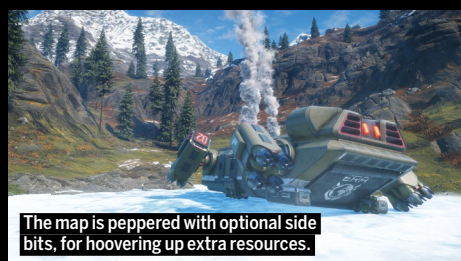
EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Second Extinction

Yeah, this guy is definitely not a real dinosaur.



Second Extinction really does not skimp on the explosions.



The map is peppered with optional side bits, for hoovering up extra resources.





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Systemic Reaction

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
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SECOND EXTINCTION

For anyone who thought Muldoon was the hero of Jurassic Park

The Ankylosaurus roamed the plains of what is now North America in the late Cretaceous period. It weighed as much as a pair of rhinos, and put their thick skin and horns to shame with an armoured shell and bony club at the end of its tail that could sweep predators' legs from under them.

Seventy million years later, it was discovered by a Victorian palaeontologist named after – of all people – PT Barnum, the circus barker from that Hugh Jackman musical. And a century after that, I've just managed to get one tipped onto its back, and am hastily emptying my minigun's entire belt feed into the glowing weak spot on its exposed belly. (Oddly enough, this tactic is kind of historically accurate, minigun aside – flipping an Ankylosaur tortoise-style was the only way predators could get past that armour plating.)

Playing *Second Extinction* results in a lot of moments like this, where I find my mind reaching back over a childhood of dinosaur books like a tongue over a cavity. Trying to remember whether the venom-spitting was a real thing or an invention of Jurassic Park's, while failing to sidestep the latest glob of acid catapulted through the air. And I'm left wondering why I never heard about these raptors with the invisibility powers and naturally-occurring flashbang grenades.

OK, you probably won't be surprised to learn that these last two are rather less faithful to scientific fact. There's a flimsy

justification for their existence – all mutations and a fallen Earth – but honestly, it doesn't really matter. What does matter is that *Second Extinction* crams the screen tight with uber-dinos, and hands you the means to put them back on the endangered species list: guns, grenades, and the odd orbital laser.

You and couple of friends pick characters, each with a smidge of personality and an expandable selection of perks and gadgets, then drop into the enormous map for a self-guided dinosaur safari. I mean that 'drop' bit literally, by the way – you enter the level in a metal pod, burning through the ozone and clouds.

JURAS-SICK MOVES

This is a game untroubled by subtlety, the same way my dancing is after three gin and tonics. It's all explosions and strafing and body parts sent wheeling through the air (and so is the game, wocka wocka). Occasionally, you shoot a velociraptor so hard its tail falls off. Occasionally, they drop nuggets of glowing loot I'd normally describe as tickling my lizard brain, but this is a slightly thorny term given that's what I'm currently busy splashing all over the shop.

This is about the most *Second Extinction* ever attempts to engage your brain. It makes for a perfect hangout game, with plenty of space for you to shoot the shit while you shoot shit, but also means that, without friends, your mind might start to wander to half-remembered dino-facts. It's clearly not meant to be played this way – alone, you'll get absolutely murdered, something that developer Systemic Reaction is trying to rebalance a little.

The game is currently in the Cambrian stages of Early Access – meaning you can expect to find some really weird-shaped bugs and the occasional explosion – so it may be wise to hold off a little before taking the plunge. But if you're looking for a conversational backdrop more stimulating than that fake beach you use to mask the state of your living room on Zoom calls, or have an inner child who won't mind seeing their favourite creature endlessly massacred, then *Second Extinction* delivers exactly the thrills you'd expect at first glance.

Alex Spencer

PLAYED IT



I WONDER WHY I NEVER HEARD ABOUT RAPTORS WITH INVISIBILITY POWERS BEFORE

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COVER FEATURE

Warhammer 40,000: Darktide





LIGHT IT UP

WARHAMMER 40,000:
DARKTIDE is coming,
so grab your torch
and chainsword

By Fraser Brown

Warhammer 40,000: Darktide

After more than five years surrounded by *Vermintide's* skittering, shrieking Skaven, Fatshark has jumped into the grimdark future of Warhammer 40,000. *Darktide* pits another four brave souls against unrelenting waves of monstrous enemies in a city being corrupted by the power of Chaos. It's a meat grinder, but you get to be the teeth, chewing through hordes, leaving nothing but dismembered body parts in your bloody wake. And this time, there are chainswords.

There was a teaser trailer in July, but since then Fatshark hasn't given much away about its next co-op outing. Chatting to the team, it's clear they're being careful about what exactly they reveal at what is still a fairly early stage. They want to keep some surprises, but there's also much that's still up in the air. They're asking themselves a lot of questions about *Darktide's* final form.

"We are still iterating on it and still trying to find our feet," says

Fatshark co-founder Martin Wahlund. "It's all about the fun factor and getting it right, and getting the feeling right. We want to welcome *Vermintide* players, but we also want to make sure that everyone who hasn't played them is just as welcome, and we need to onboard them in a good way."

What is clear is that *Darktide* expands on *Vermintide* rather than completely reinventing it. You charge into missions with three friends, slaughter your way through enemies – with occasional breaks for some problem solving – and over the course of your misadventures you grow stronger, get better equipment, and maybe tart yourself up with some cosmetic flourishes. Within that familiar routine, however, Fatshark is tinkering away and planning some significant changes, with seemingly every little system being put under the microscope.

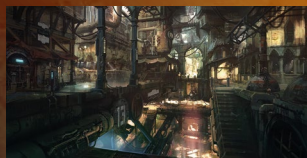
GRIM TIDINGS

The setting, of course, necessitates some of these changes. This is the far-flung future, so there's fancy tech, guns everywhere, and gargantuan hive cities that house billions of people. But this is still a universe with knights who waded into battle with swords and shields. There's a

The humble guardsman is the lasgun-toting backbone of the Imperium's army.



"AS WE'VE SEEN IN VERMINTIDE, PLAYERS REALLY ENJOY TWEAKING THEIR LOADOUTS"



1 HABZONES

The hive's billions live in the habzones, where you might even find some survivors holding out against the tide of Nurgle's abominations.

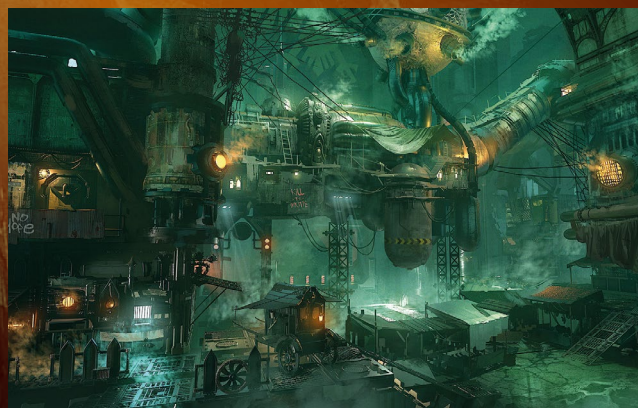


2 WALKWAYS

If you want an idea of the scale of the hive, why not visit one of our gothic, picturesque bridges and walkways. Don't look down.

HIVE TOURS

It's a prime holiday destination – just ask Nurgle



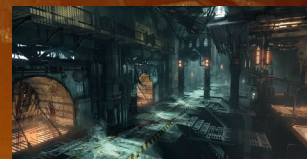
3 MARKET

Come to the underground water market to admire the uplifting graffiti and cheery atmosphere. It's probably even nicer now that Nurgle's moved in.



4 SERVICE TUNNELS

Why not explore the guts of the hive? Though the weather isn't great – we'll warn you, an umbrella doesn't protect you from acid rain.



5 PRISON

Don't forget to be on your best behaviour. The Imperium isn't delicate when it comes to upholding the law. Hence all the blood stains.

medieval fantasy element amid the gun-toting sci-fi, which means there's the potential for a lot more flexibility.

"We want to make it possible for players to play in more ways," says Wahlund. "So we're going to have way more customisation than we had in *Vermintide*. We work in a lot of that, and you'll see more varied characters." He stops short of actually unveiling the full list of who exactly we'll be playing, unfortunately. The Imperial guardsman is the only one that's been confirmed, though more have been shown off in concept art and trailers, including a huge ogryn.

Fatshark's desire for variety has manifested itself in several ways, and

MAIN: We haven't seen any yet, but apparently there will occasionally be NPCs in the streets.

the most fundamental, perhaps, is melee and ranged combat now sharing the spotlight. *Vermintide* is a first-person melee series with several ranged options, but in *Darktide* it's an even split. Guns are extremely common in 40K, but the tabletop fights still frequently devolve into close-quarters brawls; and this makes even more sense within the confines of a hive city. What you use depends on the mission you're on, as well as the specific encounter, so character builds are becoming more situational.

"Expanding the gameplay loop to include a ranged component and seeing how we can push that to provide a better variety of gameplay experiences also connects with the loadout choices that you make both personally and as a team," says game designer Mats Andersson. "You get to play very targeted group setups, or make one with a very wide variety of different playstyles. If you look at *Vermintide II*, you are more pigeonholed than we want to make this type of game. We want to provide more options for you to approach the same kind of content."

HIVE MINDS

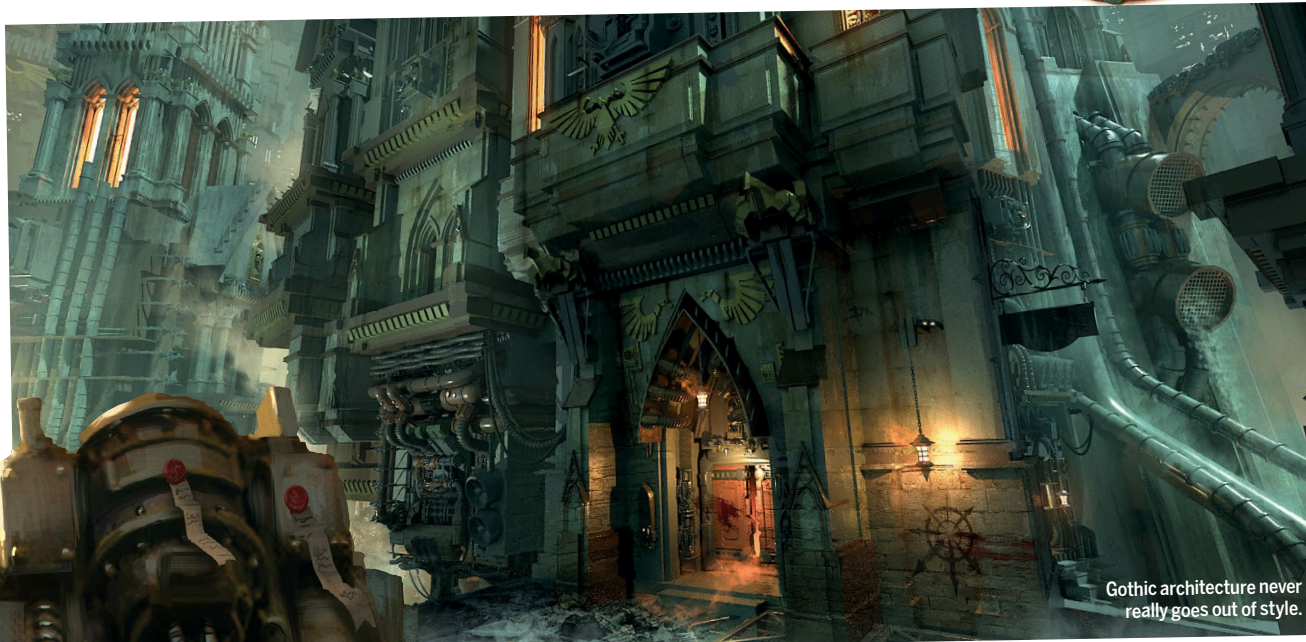
Before they delve back into the infested hive for another mission, the squad can prepare for the challenge with more granular customisation – it's not just about picking the right tools and accessories for the job. Fatshark is also considering things like talents for weapons, not just characters, and generally more ways to let you refine your character and get that alluring progression buzz.

"As we've seen in *Vermintide*, players really enjoy tweaking their loadouts," says creative director Anders De Geer. "And since we have a lot of great modders, they also want to tweak individual weapons, talents and other stuff. So we are working with a system right now that will allow players to have way more freedom than they had in *Vermintide* to customise their toolkit when they go into a mission."

This is something Fatshark's already been trying to do more in *Vermintide II* – letting players have more control over their rat-slaying adventures, via everything from rebalancing weapon choices to introducing entirely new subclasses as DLC. In *Darktide*, though, it sounds like an even more targeted approach is going to be cropping up everywhere from the off.

You can't make choices about loadouts and talents without proper intel, and that's where the mission map comes into play. This is the evolution of *Vermintide II*'s rather plain mission board and offers up a selection of crises affecting the various sectors of the gargantuan city. The idea is that you'll be able to see, at a glance, just how intense the mission will be and what modifiers are affecting it, like acid rain or blackouts. The city is constantly changing, too, with missions vanishing and maps you've already explored getting a refresh thanks to some fresh quirks.

"In *Vermintide II*, a lot of the dynamism came from the conflict director and how we spawned the



Gothic architecture never really goes out of style.

THE PACE AND THE TENSION WILL HAVE MORE PEAKS AND VALLEYS

» enemies,” says Wahlund. “Now we want to have the same type of feeling, but also working with the actual level itself, so it could be a bit different depending on how you play it and the missions that you play, but also because of the weather, electricity or gas leaks. There’s a lot of things we can play around with to get a completely different feeling when you play a mission.”

PACE MARINES

Violence, gore and waves of enemies are probably the first thing your mind conjures up when you think about *Vermintide*, but in *Darktide* the pace and the tension will have more peaks and valleys, with quieter moments to sneak around or solve a puzzle. It’s more of what you might expect in a dungeon-delving RPG.

“It’s really easy when making a game like *Vermintide* to just open the

funnel, and then open it some more, because the more enemies we throw at people, the more fun it is,” says Andersson. “But you can also go the opposite direction of actually bringing down the tempo and making it a bit more lenient. We want to be able to still provide that gameplay experience where your heart is up here all the time, but we also want to expand it into a place where you actually have time to talk and breathe. If we lower the tempo, we get a completely different kind of mood, if you will, in a level.”

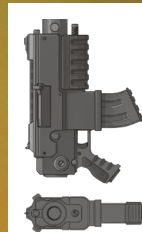
This is one of the reasons why you won’t be playing as Space Marines. They’re unstoppable juggernauts who, in a real-time setting, could easily just march through the hordes of enemies, never needing to rest, and certainly never taking a break for a chat. They’re stoic and a little boring, and Fatshark wants characters with charisma. And

fear, too, which Space Marines are also largely unfamiliar with.

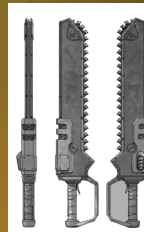
Slowing things down doesn’t always mean making things comfortable. If there’s a power outage, for instance, you’ll have to rely on flashlights to see where you’re going, making your exploration of the sector more methodical, but no less tense. An abandoned dark sector is obviously fertile ground for some horror. While the Skaven are extremely unsettling, *Darktide* seems more

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

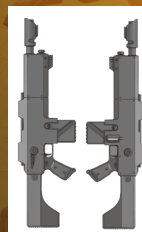
Choose your weapon

**BOLTGUN**

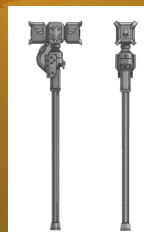
The standard Space Marine weapon, the boltgun is a devastating bit of a kit – a mobile cannon that can blow enemies to smithereens. Smaller versions are carried by the Astra Militarum.

**CHAINSWORD**

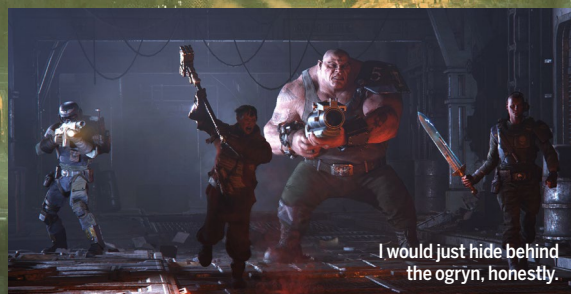
The classic melee weapon of the Imperium across the galaxy. Its sharp, grinding teeth make quick work of thick armour and alien flesh. It's usually accompanied by a gun, so you can shoot and shred.

**LASGUN**

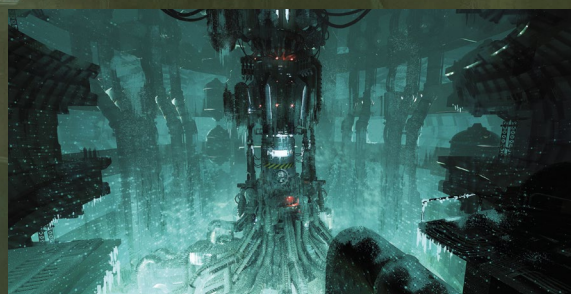
The main weapon of the Imperial army, the lasgun shoots out a focused energy beam that can sear off limbs and even puncture power armour. It's not the beast the bolter is, but it's still a good, solid weapon.

**POWER HAMMER**

This bad boy is as good at cracking armour as it is rocks thanks to the disruption field that surrounds it. Just think of how many poxwalkers you could take out with one devastating swing.



I would just hide behind the ogryn, honestly.

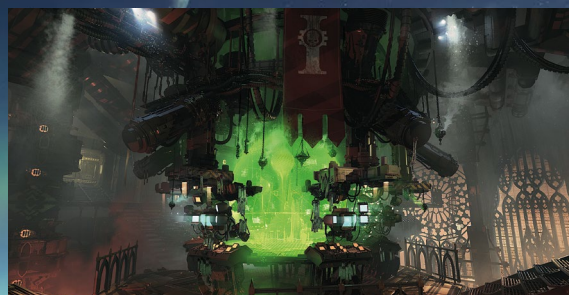
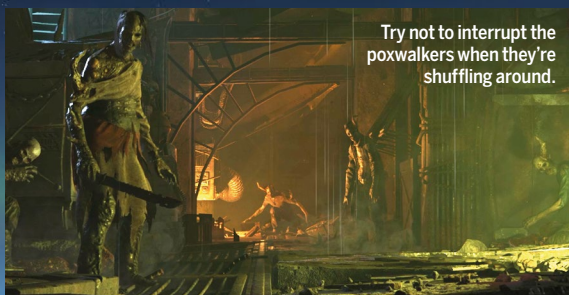


primed to get you jumping out of your seat, at least when you're sneaking through pitch-black areas that are filled with poxwalkers, the gruesome zombies cursed by the Chaos god of disease, Nurgle.

Poxwalkers are *Darktide's* horde enemy. They gather in large groups and, though weak individually, can overwhelm squads with their huge numbers and relentless attacks. What makes them different from the Skaven, though, is that they're not constantly dialled up to 11. When you see the Skaven, they're charging at you, screeching at the top of their lungs, but zombies are typically a bit more chill, giving

squads the opportunity to sneak around them. But that can also make them even more dangerous than the Skaven.

Just before we spoke, producer Steven Brigas found himself climbing up a ladder in the hive, believing himself to be alone, only to find a horde of poxwalkers just hanging out, waiting for him right at the top. If they'd been Skaven, they would have been jumping down that ladder straight away, spoiling their ambush. The poxwalkers got the better of Brigas, but next time they might not appear there, or he might be able to mow them down with a very large gun. Having all this



"CO-OP IS SOMETHING THAT WE'VE FOCUSED ON EVEN MORE THIS TIME AROUND"

devastating weaponry means you can annihilate more enemies, and Fatshark can throw even more at you – but not all of the time.

IN THE DARK

Making sure players aren't entirely sure what's lurking around the corner has been key to keeping people around in *Vermintide*, and Brigas says that Fatshark's taken a look at all of its systems to see how it can throw more surprises at players, rework maps and refine *Darktide*'s ability to keep dragging everyone back to the hive. The city itself gives the team even more freedom to experiment. These arcologies are designed to house billions of people, and while a hive world might contain thousands of them, each is still a self-contained city that functions like a world within a world.

"The scale is huge," says Brigas. "For me, what's really fun about a

hive is, even if the odds are one in trillions, it's already happened. And that's just such a fun concept to play with. It gives us a lot of room to just keep growing and doing interesting stuff for a long time."

One mission could see your squad navigating the hive's disgusting sewage system in the dark, while your next misadventure could take you to a well-lit habitation zone that might even contain NPCs who have yet to be killed or transformed by Nurgle's minions. You probably won't be making your way through throngs of people, but there will be reminders that you're fighting in a place that was once teeming with life.

Revisiting an area that once housed some NPCs and seeing it taken over by enemies or emptied by a deadly gas leak is also bound to have more of an impact, reinforcing the stakes and making it clear that

MEET THE NEIGHBOURS

Who you'll be sharing the hive with



POXWALKERS

Poxwalkers are the cannon fodder of Nurgle's cursed armies – shambling, plague-ridden husks that serve as the living weapons of the traitor guard. They attack with teeth and claws and whatever simple weapons they can find, and they keep mutating even following death.

Like regular zombies, poxwalkers gather in hordes and can quickly swarm you.

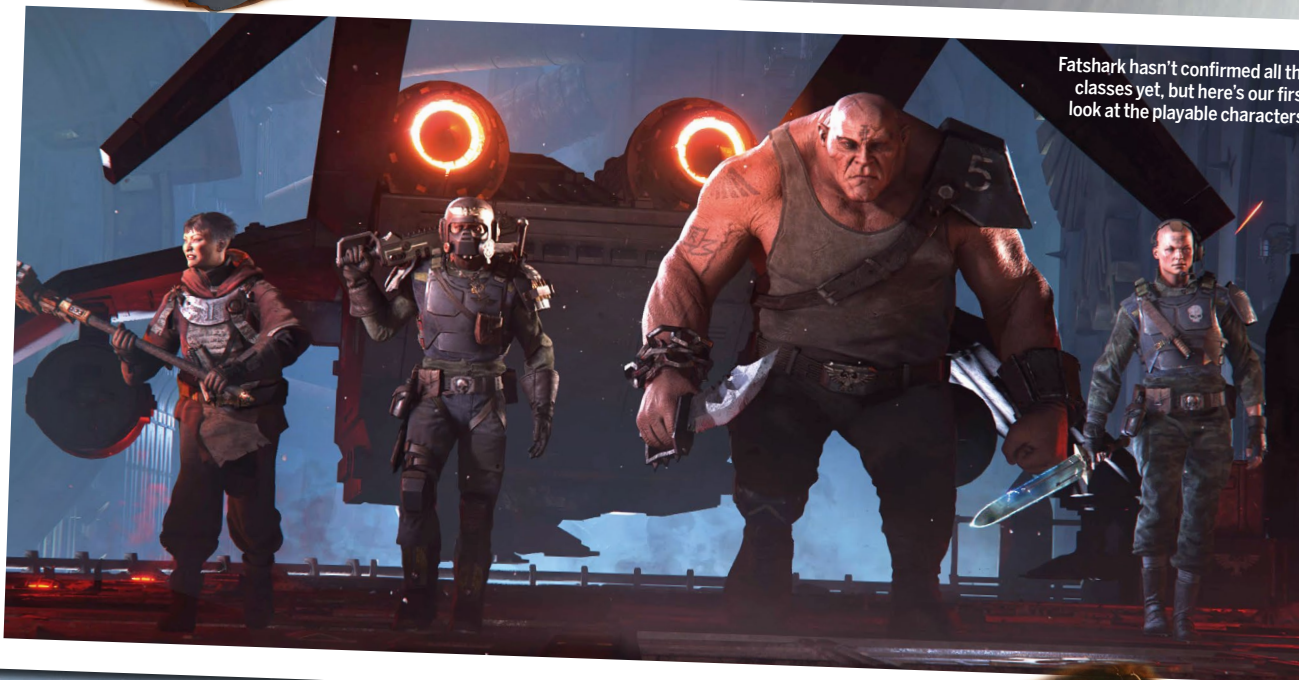


TRAITOR GUARD

The traitor guard are former members of the Astra Militarum who have pledged themselves to Chaos. This regiment is the Moebian Sixth, deployed to help out the Moebian government, but are now attempting to seize power.

These treacherous guardsmen fight with anything from simple melee weapons and chain axes to lasguns and combat shotguns.

Fatshark hasn't confirmed all the classes yet, but here's our first look at the playable characters.



encouraging dedicated players to watch out for them and jump in as soon as one appears.

If you're looking for a group to take on these missions, Fatshark's trying to ensure that you still get to choose where you go. Where *Vermintide 2* strongly encourages players to use Quick Play, which throws you into a random mission, *Darktide* will grant more freedom to choose specific missions to play.

"Co-op is something that we've focused on even more this time around," says De Geer, and that goes beyond letting you have more of a say on where your co-op adventures take you. "We're trying to find more places to introduce co-op, and one of the strongest ones are special enemies, but there's also customising your loadout with your team and making sure you've covered all your bases."

STICK TOGETHER

Vermintide's specialists, even the ones who couldn't take much of a beating, forced players to work together. If there's an assassin around, you need your teammates to keep their eyes open, or to kill it if it jumps you. In *Darktide*, Fatshark wants to use them to challenge players more and make them experiment with proper team tactics. It's still not settled on what these specialists will be, however. There's a lot of units that could fit the bill, though the team is mostly restricted to the roster of the tabletop game. Whatever the final list ends up being, the goal is to create encounters where it's imperative that players

learn to cooperate effectively. "And if they don't," Brigas warns, "then they're not going to survive."

There are other things that might be used to bring players together – non-combat activities, for instance, and puzzles that are a bit more involved than pushing some stones in the correct order. There might be times when the party has to split up, too, but with the cooperative elements still intact. Maybe two players could fight off waves of enemies, while the other half of the quartet deal with a less bloody problem. This could also provide more opportunities for players to shine even if they're not racking up the kills. But Andersson emphasises that it's really about letting the whole team shine; letting everyone feel powerful together. "It's way more fun moving down a horde together than you doing it on your own with everyone else watching," he says. So the idea is to give everyone a chance to contribute, whether it's solving a puzzle, helping your squad by tanking a tough enemy, or utilising everyone's skills to kill a specialist.

Darktide is still in this exciting stage where it's ripe with possibilities, but at this point it's hard to predict what it will look like when finished. Fatshark's idea of *Darktide* is still a compelling one, though, drawing out the best bits of *Vermintide* and investigating why they worked so well, and how that can be applied in other places or taken in new directions. And honestly, you can't go far wrong with chainswords. ■

this is a warzone. Dynamic missions seem to suit live service games in particular, where developers can react to player feedback, tweak the modifiers, or introduce brand new ones in an update. The mission map can be "altered instantly, basically," says De Geer, with Fatshark able to wrench out a feature, like some bad weather, make some changes and then pop it back in once it's happy with the improvements. It also lets the team design special missions that appear only for a set time. Wahlund says these could come with additional unique rewards,

MAIN: Hives aren't just very big, they're also very tall. Don't take the stairs.

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FUTURE SHOCK

We have to address the elephant in the room: *Cyberpunk 2077* came out after our cut-off date, and thus wasn't in consideration for any category here. But it may feature in the extra awards given on www.pcgamer.com.



Celebrating the best
in PC gaming from a
year like no other



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**BEST GAME
OF THE YEAR**
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PERSONAL PICK



Chris Livingston BLASEBALL

Blaseball is a lot of things – a website where you can bet fake coins on simulated games, where fans can vote on rule changes, and where umpires blinded by solar eclipses can incinerate players on a whim. Occasionally The Shelled One appears, a sort of angry peanut god who can imprison players inside a shell until freed by a weather condition known as Lots of Birds. *Blaseball* is weird and probably indescribable. That's why it's great.



PERSONAL PICK



Rachel Watts IF FOUND

Dreamfeel's adventure is a powerful coming-of-age story about being young, queer, and trying to get your shit together. *If Found* follows Kasio, a trans woman returning home to a small Irish town in 1993, and her experiences with the rural community. Wiping away images instead of clicking through dialogue is a smart twist, and erasing Kasio's words means letting go of the past to make room for a new beginning.



FINAL FANTASY XIV

★ **Steven Messner:** *Final Fantasy XIV* is the most consistently excellent MMO I've ever played. I started back in 2013, with the relaunch, and have consistently played for seven years. What keeps me coming back isn't just the memorable boss fights and beautiful locations, though. It's that *Final Fantasy XIV* tells an emotionally gripping story that just keeps raising the stakes. Case in point: its latest expansion, *Shadowbringers*, takes players on an interdimensional journey to a parallel universe while somehow also keeping a tight focus on the characters that I've come to love over these past seven years.

What makes this the best ongoing game in 2020 is down to how scientific Square Enix is with updates. While other MMOs have big ups and downs, *FFXIV*'s expansions and updates are always on an upward trajectory, adding more new dungeons, satisfying endgame activities like raids, and a hearty helping of episodic story quests. Even though the pandemic delayed it, the 5.3 patch was worth the wait. It offered a surprisingly emotional climax to the main *Shadowbringers* story as the narrative shifted to begin laying the foundations for next

year's expansion. I love this game, and I love how Square Enix has created such a wholesome and positive relationship with its fans.

James Davenport: *Final Fantasy XIV* represents one of the strangest eras of my life. I don't care for mainline *Final Fantasy* games, I don't usually play MMOs, and yet I played the pre-condensed *A Realm Reborn* all the way through to the end of *Shadowbringers* in two months. It was compulsive play at first, something to do in a depressive bout, but it gripped me.

Final Fantasy XIV's story is as heart wrenching, subversive, and surreal as videogame storytelling gets, and the best expansion by a mile is part of the free package now. *Heavensward* is a bleak real-world analogy where two warring nations interrogate their

shared history to find out where their hatred for one another first took root. Characters are driven by dogma without foundation, epic journeys end in empty denouements, and characters are plagued by sheer exhaustion and sorrow more often than convoluted twists and betrayals. And once it's done, there are two excellent expansions that follow. I play *Final Fantasy XIV* strictly for the story and the game supports it. ■

FINAL FANTASY XIV TELLS AN EMOTIONALLY GRIPPING STORY





HALF-LIFE: ALYX

★ **Chris Livingston:** Whatever tech wizardry Valve did under the hood, it allowed me to play *Half-Life: Alyx* for sessions lasting for hours at a time without headaches. That's something I've never managed to do in VR before, as typically after a half-hour of wearing a headset I'm ready for a break. *Alyx* is also, by far, the best looking VR game I've ever played, with so many stop-and-stare moments I lost track.

But *Alyx*'s true success is in somehow finding the waning interest I had in the *Half-Life* saga after all these years and setting it ablaze again. The first half of the game dragged more than a little, confining me to slimy sewers and throwing headcrabs at my face, but the second half became a thrilling adventure as the story finally began to unfold and I rushed wide-eyed into its powerful conclusion. As both a prequel and a sequel it seemed like it might be tied too tightly to past and future events to contain anything surprising or contribute much to the saga. But it cleverly tampered with events and characters we've known for years to put a new

twist on the old story, one so satisfying it makes me fervently hope we don't have to wait another decade or more to continue the tale.

Andy Kelly: I was not expecting *Half-Life: Alyx* to be such a good horror game. The Combine firefights are fun, but it's when you're in the tunnels beneath City 17 that the game becomes really special. Poison headcrabs were unsettling enough in *Half-Life 2*, but being in a dark room full of them, in VR, with nothing but a tiny flashlight to guide your way is the most my nerves have been wracked since *Alien: Isolation*. I always found headcrabs a bit annoying in the first two games, but in VR they're sensational. They leap and screech at you, and you can't help but flinch when they do. And your run-in with Jeff, a terrifying super-zombie, is one of *Half-Life*'s greatest set-pieces.

It's also a strange sensation seeing City 17 from such an intimate perspective. It's always been a great setting, but now it feels infinitely more real and tactile. If you thought striders were big in *Half-Life 2*, wait till one's towering over you in *Half-Life: Alyx*. ■



MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

★ **James Davenport:** It's easy to say *Microsoft Flight Simulator*'s greatest trick is that it's just Bing maps in an aeroplane costume, but it's the flight simulation wrapper that grounds a free web application in reality like no other game. Flying over your hometown hits differently from typing its name into a search bar.

I can't speak to the depth of the flying simulation. It's not why I keep revisiting *Microsoft Flight Simulator*. Like so many of us, I'm stuck at home waiting out a pandemic. But in *MFS* I've charted a course from a remote Siberian airport to the Tunguska meteor crater; I've skimmed the top of the Tetons; I flew to the northern tip of Iceland, turned on active pause, and stared out at the edge of everything. *MFS*' to-scale rendition of Earth is much more than a bullet point, it's the closest I've felt to the world glued to a monitor.

Andy Kelly: Before the pandemic I travelled a lot, and with every day I'm stuck at home I miss it more and more.

Which is probably part of the reason why *Microsoft Flight Simulator* landed so perfectly for me this year. It's an astonishing technical achievement, and the feeling of picking somewhere in the world – *anywhere* – and near-instantly flying over a photorealistic representation of it still rules, even after doing it a thousand times. Whether it's some dramatic landmark like the Grand Canyon, or just the small Scottish suburb I grew up in, it all looks amazing, with volumetric clouds, cities lighting up at night, and some of the prettiest, most realistic skies I've ever seen in a game.

I also love how customisable the experience is. Sometimes I like clipping the full yoke and throttle setup to my desk and really getting into the simulation. But it's just as easy to plug in an Xbox controller, stream my PC to the TV, and play it on the couch. That's a remarkable thing to say about a hardcore flight simulator, but a good example of how *Microsoft Flight Simulator* is more open and accessible than ever. ■





HADES



Rachel Watts: As someone who has zero patience for dying in games, *Hades* has made me a roguelike convert. It's a dungeon crawler that gives the gods of ancient Greece action and attitude, all encased in Supergiant's signature artstyle. But the most impressive feat that *Hades* has, that defeats one of the genre's biggest hangups, is it makes failure fun.

Combat feels punchy and intense, and there are plenty of godly boons to be bestowed that make every run a new endeavour. Testing out each newly discovered weapon or ability never feels like a waste of time, each one feels like it's been carefully thought out by Supergiant.

Progression and persistence just melt away as each run gets easier and dying never feels frustrating when I get to catch up with the characters back at the hub. If you're familiar with Greek mythology, you'll know that the gods thrived on drama, and *Hades* drops you right into the middle of it. Learning more about the interweaving narratives that tie this family together acts as a reward for your failed runs.

Navigating the underworld and the inner workings of this dysfunctional family are what makes *Hades* such a blast.

Jody Macgregor: I didn't think I'd like the gun. There's a shield with a charge-bash, and metal gloves that make you Hellboy. Why would I

want a gun in a game about fighting Greek mythology? But *Hades* encourages you to try every weapon, offering bonus currency for a random one each run, as well as bounties for defeating bosses with each. Eventually I gave in and got used to the very different rhythm of a weapon that needs reloading, realised I should be spamming its grenade special. And that's

how I got my first clear.

Choosing a weapon in *Hades* is like choosing a class in *Diablo*. You're playing the same game, but completely different. Irrelevant boons become essential, bosses become cakewalks. Then you get cocky, then you get killed.

I adore *Hades'* take on classical gods, inter-related and over-dramatic hot people perfect for soap opera. I was pleasantly surprised Zagreus isn't just rebelling because that's what sons do, but is on a quest to find his birth mother after being lied to his entire life – a real experience plenty of adoptees have.

I also need that time to unwind because the frantic intensity of each run, whether spent launching

grenades empowered by Dionysus to do hangover damage or just swinging a sword, leaves my arms jittery with adrenaline. And I need time to plan my loadout – the combination of keepsake and weapon, upgrades and boons, that's *definitely* going to get me my next clear. ■

CHOOSING A WEAPON IS LIKE CHOOSING A CLASS IN DIABLO





DOOM ETERNAL

★ **James Davenport:** I could fill a bathtub with the palm sweat *Doom Eternal* milked from me this year. It is easily the most intense shooter of 2020, and not just because it throws dozens of demons at you at once.

Arenas are filled with hazards and demon compositions designed to test FPS habits, old and new. The most hated enemy of 2020 might be the Marauder, who inverts your embedded *Doom* habits with melee duels. The expansion continues the trend: the Spirit possesses and buffs fellow demons, while the giant tentacle pancakes whole arenas while the ants (you and co) below duke it out. Pointing and clicking alone won't cut the cake. *Eternal* demands sharp situational awareness at 1,000 mph.

All the while you're treading water, topping up resources with glory kills, fire and chainsaws.

Doom Eternal is a violent give-and-take that tests endurance, reflex and wit in equal measure.

Evan Lahti: One of the interesting criticisms of *Doom Eternal* is that it's 'overdesigned'. Id scattered piles of stuff to collect across *Eternal*'s hellscarred worlds: Sentinel Crystals, Sentinel Batteries, Slayer Keys, Runes, one-ups, Doomfish,

character and weapon skins, weapon mods... you can't walk 50 feet without stumbling into some kind of floating, glowing pickup. I did feel like the overemphasis on these resources took some of the purity out of the action, but the bigger point remains: *Doom Eternal* is one of the only singleplayer FPSes that draws out that rare, electric feeling of genuine improvisation. Every other major FPS campaign of the last few years, pleasant as they might've been, doesn't produce spur-of-the-moment reactions as a baseline.

And despite that very modern progression system, *Eternal* achieves this the old-fashioned way: by empowering you with progressively more agility and throwing stupid amounts of evil at you. Whatever cocktail of bad guys *Eternal* spills into the environment, mindlessly spamming your favourite weapon

isn't going to cut them down. You're going to have to move continuously, juggle your weapons to preserve ammo, and find the right moment to refill your armour and health. When you pull it off, you feel like your motor skills are driving Doomguy faster than you can make sense of what's happening, and it's glorious. ■

DOOM ETERNAL DEMANDS SHARP SITUATIONAL AWARENESS



PERSONAL PICK



Fraser Brown

CLOUDPUNK

Cloudpunk isn't a long game, but I could drive around the colossal dystopia of Nivalis for hours. Every skyway is filled with vehicles buzzing around stunning voxel skyscrapers like hundreds of neon insects. It's gloomy and vibrant, and you can explore the whole thing – from the grim undercity to the corporate spires. You also get a lovely AI pooch! The post-launch addition of a first-person mode makes it even more essential.



PERSONAL PICK



Jody Macgregor

FORT TRIUMPH

Fort Triumph is turn-based tactics with *Heroes of Might & Magic*'s overworld, battlemaps covered in objects that can be moved or knocked over with spells, tools, or just kicks, all wrapped in Pratchett-esque fantasy parody. A troll with concerns about dungeon health and safety explains you should "skulk from the knees". It's knockabout fun that had the bad luck to release within weeks of *Chimera Squad* and *Gears Tactics*.



PERSONAL PICK



Rich Stanton

WIDE OCEAN
BIG JACKET

This is a game that presents a camping trip from multiple perspectives: a pair of teenage friends and an older couple. You switch between them over the course of the trip while the characters discuss growing up. It's a wonderful short experience about the slight limbo of no longer being a child, but not yet an adult, and how we think of it at different times of our lives. It's also the funniest game I played all year.



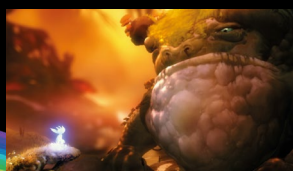
PERSONAL PICK



Tyler Wilde

ORI AND THE WILL
OF THE WISPS

This isn't a high concept sequel: it's another lavishly illustrated platformer, but with far bigger cross-sections of forests and swamps and caves to explore, more characters, and a grander narrative. The increased scope introduces some sloppiness – I found the combat mostly unfun – but taken at a leisurely pace, triple-jumping through *Ori and the Will of the Wisps* is like a soothing eucalyptus balm.



SPELUNKY 2

★ **Evan Lahti:** Olde *Spelunky*, our 2013 GOTY, was a clever proc-gen platformer that along with other roguelikes helped usher in the era of 'Difficulty is Good'. But seven years later, the indie hit's legacy might be the daring, creative player feats it inspired: the eggplant run (escorting a useless eggplant all the way through to the end of the game), the no-gold run, a speed run of Hell itself.

What's special about *Spelunky 2*, then, is how much the game's lead designer Derek Yu drew on the legendary achievements of the *Spelunky* community as inspiration for this sequel. The eggplant, for example, is no longer just an item: it's a path to reach a sprawling, secret level that contains the sacred lore of the eggplant god. NPCs are no longer cardboard cutouts, they're part of the exponentially deeper web of secrets, and helping them can produce unexpected help later in your run.

Spelunky remains PC gaming's Mario, a platformer built on pleasant, slippery physics that drips with the things that make our platform unique: self-created goals, intricacy, depth, and a rich community of hyper-enthusiasts to admire.

Rich Stanton: I almost think of *Spelunky 2* as an old-fashioned sequel, a 2020 game from the 1990s, when a platformer's sequel would be simply more of the same, but better. This was the right approach for following up a roguelike that was already as near-as-dammit perfect.

Spelunky 2 knows this won't be the first time for any of its players, so has dastardly moles purpose-built to interrupt thinking time, a jungle with spiked walls and bear traps to snap-off careless explorers, and the temptation of the ghost jar.

That fragile jar embodies my personal *Spelunking* motto: get rich or die trying. You often have to choose between carrying it to the exit, or a companion (money vs health). It's easily smashed, so you're even more terrified of getting hit than usual, and completely neuters offensive options. The money's irresistible, but one slip can end your run. *Spelunky 2* is all about making choices, and dealing with the consequences, up until you make the choice that kills you. Reaching out to grab the ghost jar, you feel that in microcosm. ■

SPELUNKY
REMAINS
PC GAMING'S
MARIO



PC GAMER
BEST
MULTIPLAYER
2020

VALORANT

★ **Evan Lahti:** Despite decades of developers borrowing and improving on each others' ideas, it's surprising that we still often get hung up on 'copycat' games. And there's no series more sacred, more untouchable than *Counter-Strike* on PC, an FPS whose weapons and maps mostly resemble what we played 20 years ago. With *Valorant*, we learned that not only can *Counter-Strike* be copied, but that it's durable enough as an idea to be mutated and mixed without diluting the essence of what makes a high-lethality, angles-driven team FPS so fun.

At first *Valorant* was a glossy invitation to dust off those mothballed *Counter-Strike* skills; its weaponset is practically untouched from *CS:GO*'s. But it quickly became its own thing, a remix of *CS*' format with walls of vision-denying smoke, healing, revives, scout drones, a turret and powerful ultimate abilities. It all worked: the range of utility abilities are harmonious with the maps, and the characters don't eclipse the action. Even teleporter fake-outs started to feel novel to this *CS* purist.

Phil Savage: *Counter-Strike* has always felt impenetrable to me – so heavily dependant on learned knowledge of maps and weapons and sightlines that I never felt I had a chance to catch up. *Valorant*'s main appeal, then, was that it was a lot like something I wanted to try, but new enough that I felt I wasn't at a massive disadvantage coming in.

And while I quickly took to the pace and lethality of a *CS*-like shooter, ultimately it's the characters and their abilities that keep me coming back. As Evan notes, they don't eclipse the action – it's not *Overwatch* – but they do give you a specific skillset that helps you find a place within your overall team strategy. At first their skills can feel underwhelming, but *Valorant* taught me to appreciate the power of a subtle play that nudges a match in your favour. I felt incredible the first time I used a smoke to disrupt an enemy push, buying a few seconds needed to let the bomb do its job. And I love the way abilities like Jett's Updraft create an added dimension to the precise, measured movement and gunplay. ■

PC GAMER
BEST
RPG
2020

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

★ **Steven Messner:** *Valhalla* was a bit of a surprise to me, honestly. I expected it to be pretty good, but I had no idea that Ubisoft's next *Assassin's Creed* was going to be such a memorable adventure. What matters here are the little details – the numerous ways Ubisoft listened to feedback from *Odyssey* to make *Valhalla* a much more inviting RPG. Level-gating is gone, the open-world doesn't feel like a checklist of boring activities, and the combat has been refined to include more depth.

It's also the first time an *Assassin's Creed* story really gripped me from beginning to end. *Odyssey*'s storytelling was often clunky and a little obtuse, but *Valhalla* does a fantastic job of exploring Eivor's relationship with her adoptive brother Sigurd while questioning the traditions of Norse culture with a surprising amount of nuance.

While the series' transition into a big, meaty RPG has been a little clumsy, *Valhalla* makes it all worth it.

James Davenport: I knew *Valhalla* was something special when, as part of a sidequest, I pulled an axe out of a Viking's skull. Important note: he was alive and talking to me, asking if I could help with his little problem. The guy collapsed and died immediately of course, and a little XP notification popped up to let me know the quest was done with. That was it. Stumble into a dying man, pull out the painful jewellery. Quest complete.

In another I told a girl clinging onto a false symbol – the last leaf hanging from a tree – that it doesn't mean her father was still alive. So I told her to move on, then shot the leaf down. Dick move, but I'm a realist. Quest complete.

Valhalla is utterly riddled with these odd encounters rather than the usual convoluted sidequests. It's more *Red Dead* than *Elder Scrolls*, imbuing the old English setting with a sense of life beyond the main conflict. For the first time in a while, a Ubisoft open world doesn't feel like a checklist, it feels like a world. ■





CRUSADER KINGS III



Fraser Brown: *Crusader Kings III* is this year's best strategy game, but it's also one of the greatest RPGs and sandboxy sims around as well. On the surface, it's not much of a departure from its predecessor, but this is a game with astounding ambition that couldn't have happened without eight years of *Crusader Kings II*. It refines and reconfigures so much that, while at a glance it's familiar, it's far from a repeat.

It's been made knowing that the audience for this sort of thing is surprisingly large and broad, something Paradox probably wasn't that sure of last time, and that means it's also the studio's most accessible grand strategy behemoth. It remains endlessly complex, but the abundance of nested tooltips and all the different ways it guides you, subtly and overtly, makes it a lot more palatable, even if it's still a bit on the intimidating side.

Let it get its hooks in you and you'll have something that will keep you engaged for the foreseeable future. If you fancy a quiet life managing some smallholdings in West Africa, you can take that break, or you take some Vikings to Asia, start a generation-spanning war and establish a controversial new religion where you eat people. Whether you dream big or small, it's really about the members of your court. Jealous knights, torture-obsessed spouses, kids who keep getting lost in the woods and eaten by bears

– you'll have to keep your eye on them all. They're maddening and wonderful and I'm really sorry I keep assassinating them.

Rick Lane: I knew I would love *Crusader Kings III* when I discovered that there is a House Lane. With the motto of 'We Choose Violence',

House Lane comprises a single woman named Debbie who is both a lunatic and a nymphomaniac. Ascribed to no court and with no other family, she exists as an island in the game's aristocratic ocean.

Once I learned this, I knew I had to elevate House Lane from a horny madwoman living as a hermit into a global medieval power. Self-imposed mission accepted, I married Debbie off to an Irish Duke

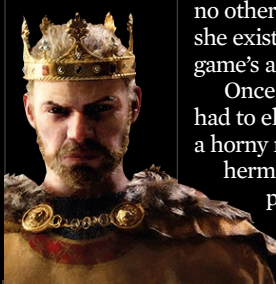
under a matrilineal marriage, gave her offspring land of their own, then switched over to her eldest son when he came of age. Now King Brian Lane rules all of Ireland, which extends across the Irish Sea, engulfing large parts of Scotland and northern England (or, as it's known in my 1066, the Danelaw).

This is the beauty of *Crusader Kings III*. It lets you spin your own narrative tangent through its immensely

detailed medieval world, coming up with ridiculous 'what if' scenarios and watching the consequences ripple across hundreds of years of history.

A game that lets you become pope is interesting enough. A game that lets you marry, kill, then eat the pope is something else entirely. ■

THE MOST ACCESSIBLE GRAND STRATEGY BEHEMOTH



PC GAMER
BEST
CARD GAME

2020

MONSTER TRAIN

★ **Wes Fenlon:** It's impossible to play *Monster Train* without Ozzy Osbourne singing Crazy Train in your head. And honestly, that's exactly how it should be, because it is a crazy train. My favourite thing about this deckbuilder is its wild makeup of factions, which I can mash together into unlikely allies. The Awoken, for example, are burly plant boys that I use as front line defenders to soak up damage for units I place behind them. But depending on the faction I pair them with, that strategy totally changes.

With the Stygian Guard I sometimes like to go all-in on spell weakness, using puny magicians to stack a multiplicative debuff on enemies and then one-shotting them. But the Stygians also have a whole other set of warriors that grow stronger every time you play a spell, turning them into deadly direct damage dealers with the right hand.

It's breezier than *Slay the Spire*. You might even win your very first run. But it keeps layering on new challenges, and after a few hours it becomes clear that the easier start was just *Monster Train's* way of making sure it's firmly set its hook before reeling you in. Getting the train to the end of the

tracks isn't your end goal – the real reward is building a killer faction combination that feels unbeatable, then finding a single card or relic to build an even better combo around. That's when things really go off the rails. Ay ay ay.

Robin Valentine: I've described *Monster Train* in the past as a game for people who've already put 200 hours into *Slay the Spire*, though that's maybe a little uncharitable. It definitely walks in that game's shadow – and overall, *Slay the Spire* is the more focused and finely tuned experience. But *Monster Train's* relative messiness is its strength.

It combines the core tactical deck-building of its inspiration with a kind of chaos that never stops escalating through a run. Your roster is always stacked with ridiculous powers and abilities, and with overwhelming odds

stacked against you, you're actively encouraged to throw together effects in combinations that would feel utterly broken in any other game.

Slay the Spire's cold efficiency is a wonderful challenge that keeps me coming back again and again – but *Monster Train* is a gleeful explosion of illegal fireworks that never lets the adrenaline drop long enough to let you get bored. ■

A KIND OF CHAOS THAT NEVER STOPS ESCALATING



PERSONAL
PICK



Wes Fenlon

RISK OF RAIN 2

It's a hell of a year for roguelikes with *Hades* and *Spelunky 2*, but my heart this year belongs to *Risk of Rain 2*, a perfect co-op time-waster. *RoR2* is all about broken builds, finding a combination of items that transforms you into an invincible murder machine – that is, until a boss one-shots you and you do it all over again. The power curve is seriously satisfying, and finding all its secrets can keep you busy for weeks on end.



PERSONAL
PICK



Andy Kelly

BLACK MESA

This Valve-approved remake of the original *Half-Life* finally left Early Access this year, adding its anticipated Xen chapters to finish the story off properly. The new Xen is a revelation, turning one of the original game's worst sets of levels into a late-game highlight. Purists will question some of the more dramatic changes, but this is a great way to experience Gordon Freeman's first adventure, with vastly improved visuals and physics.





PHASMOPHOBIA

★ Rich Stanton: The first thing my team of crack spook-hunters look at in a *Phasmophobia* mission is whether the ghost responds to everyone, or only people who are alone. When it's the latter, the mood darkens.

Communication is at the heart of this experience, and even the most hardened don't enjoy being alone with a ghost. The array of equipment forces the team to work in tandem, necessitating constant chatting, while the ghost 'listens' to what's being said. Rule one: never admit you're scared.

The most common sentences in the game begin with "I think I saw..." as one player half-catches something and the team rushes over. When the lights are on and you're setting up, it's all bonhomie and wisecracks about the wallpaper. Then stuff starts to happen, the chat gets quieter and, with no real means of protection from the ghost, you'll see players start to huddle together.

The brilliance of this co-op experience is that it thrives on communication, then builds aspects of the experience on

what players are saying, whether deliberately or thoughtlessly. And there's no thrill quite like being in a room with your mates, asking "where are you?" and, a few seconds later, the silence is broken by the word "here".

James Davenport: Finally, a game for all mid '00s teens glued to paranormal message boards, staying up late on school nights to record the newest episode of *Ghost Hunters*. It's apt that *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* released a decade ago, catapulted into the social consciousness by its popularity among early YouTube personalities. *Phasmophobia* is experiencing a similar explosion on Twitch, but this time the experience is shared among friends.

Because *Phasmophobia* uses tools straight off the hardware store, ghosts feel like real existential threats rather than thematic provocations to wrap a moral around. Throw in some friends and *Phasmophobia* easily replicates that same fear, grounding the supernatural in something a little more real and far less predictable than any scripted horror. ■



PARADISE KILLER

★ Andy Kelly: *Paradise Killer* came out of nowhere and single-handedly reinvented the detective genre. The first project from indie studio Kaizen Gameworks, this is a detective game that lets you actually *detect*. You're presented with a crime, a densely detailed island full of clues and suspects, and you can go to court and present your case whenever you like. This freeform structure is bold, but it pays off. A single, well-hidden clue can transform the version of events you've built up in your head, and it's possible to pin the crime on the wrong person if you missed a clue. The game won't even tell you if you got it wrong; you just have to live with it, like a real detective would.

As well as being a great detective game, *Paradise Killer* is also an audio/visual feast. The vivid art style, outlandish character designs, idiosyncratic writing, and superb soundtrack combine to create one of the most visually and aurally stimulating games I've played in years. It's also deeply, deeply weird. This is a mythical fantasy world of gods and

demons, but also blandly contemporary, with convenience stores and apartment blocks sitting alongside immense crystal statues of goat-headed deities. Like the soundtrack, it's a dazzling fusion of styles that gives the game a completely unique identity.

The first time I presented my case to court, I was convinced I'd hoovered up every last morsel of evidence on the island. But the outcome was far from satisfying, as half a dozen characters I loved ended up being executed. I wasn't sure, but I felt like something was wrong, so I loaded an earlier save and looked for more clues. Then I found something that completely turned my case on its head; the smoking gun that every detective dreams of. I returned to court and watched things play out in a shockingly different – and less traumatic – way. *Paradise Killer* sets a new bar for detective games, and does it with a singular, eccentric style. It's also one of a very small number of videogames whose soundtrack I've bought on vinyl. The music is just that good. ■



★
PC GAMER
GAME OF
THE YEAR

2020

DEATH STRANDING



James Davenport: *Death Stranding* is a hypnotic exercise in dramatic serenity. For 90 percent of my 100-plus hours wandering the gorgeous, rocky terrain, I was completely alone. It was just me and Norman Reedus' gentle breath. It's nothing special for an open-world game to punt you out into a huge space on your lonesome, but *Death Stranding* understands how isolation feels, that jerky oscillation between peace and terror.

You're alone in your job, delivering gear (and oxytocin) to subterranean settlements, and you're alone out there in good ol' indifferent, unforgiving nature. *Death Stranding* is about carrying on anyway and trying not to panic when things get worse. Because they will. I've tumbled down cliffs and slid down a river or 12, but scrambling to adjust and salvage my shipment is always a thrill. Wrap it up in morose themes and visually stunning sci-fi concepts, and *Death Stranding* goes from hiking sim to ineffable mood sim real quick – like *Journey* but with gravity and consequence.

And *Death Stranding* is a PC simulation game at heart, treating each of Normie's legs with the same attention that SCS Software gives to the 18 tyres on a semi-truck. I wish I could import my own terrain data, because getting from point A to B is an exhilarating duel with physics, tipped into one another's favour based on how much time you spent in prep. Can you carry a tower of resin up that mountain, through waist-deep snow, all before a blizzard arrives? Do you have enough climbing gear? Thermal

pads? Fresh boots? Confidence? Why do I explode like a little nuke when I die? Only way to find out is by making the slow, steady climb. Baby steps.

Andy Kelly: *Death Stranding* has completely changed the way I think about traversal in videogames. As much as I love *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, merrily skipping across mountains feels, suddenly, quite ridiculous. I don't think every open-world game should go to the same lengths of simulation as *Death Stranding*, because the exhausting struggle

of crossing a river or ascending a mountain peak is very specific to that game. But I would like to see other developers, inspired by Kojima Productions, make traversing terrain more involved and considered. It kinda

cheapens *Valhalla's* majestic Scandinavian peaks when you can scramble up them so effortlessly.

I also love how *Death*

Stranding constantly drip-feeds you tools and gadgets to gradually make your job easier. At first it's just you, your boots, and the elements, but later you get access to floating cargo platforms, electric tricycles, and exoskeletons that let you carry more weight. However, even with these helping hands, getting from place to place is still a challenge. When you encounter one of the game's many varied, rugged landscapes, it almost feels like a puzzle to be solved. You stand at the foot of a mountain, bulky packages strapped to every inch of your body, and wonder how the hell you're gonna get to the top. And when you do, after much toil, it feels incredible. ■

WHY DO I EXPLODE LIKE A LITTLE NUKE WHEN I DIE?



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

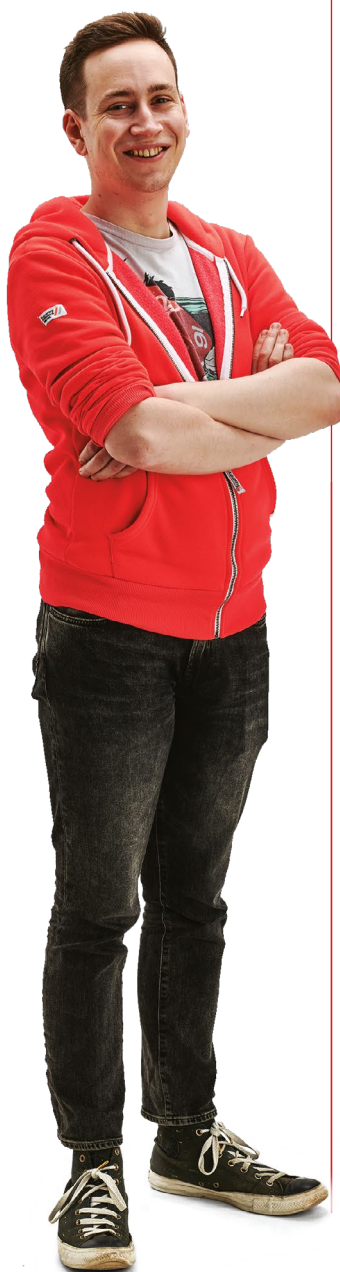
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Chaos reigns

We've entered a strange season of reviews. A time of sudden, pandemic-induced delays, and games taking their last chance to be out before Christmas 2020. A time of next-gen console launch games sheepishly showing up on PC too (and looking all the better for it). A time of hopeful indie games growing increasingly bizarre as they fight to stand out from the crowd – or just go viral on Twitter. A time of Harmonix relaunching the music game, again (or perhaps just a Mouth Sounds simulator). A time of April Fools jokes becoming full-fledged *Yakuza* sequels. And, most of all, a time of games scrambling to stay out of the way of *Cyberpunk 2077* as its release date drifts month by month, while Ubisoft releases the year's three biggest open world games within a six week span like a squid squirting a cloud of ink to dissuade an oncoming predator.

ROBIN VALENTINE

PRINT EDITOR

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LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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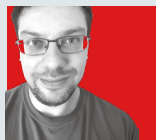
This month's hairy, axe-wielding reviewers...



STEVEN MESSNER
Specialist in
Viking stealth.
Currently playing
Assassin's Creed
Valhalla
This month
'Assassinated' half of
England with an axe.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Whatever the hell is
going on in Yakuza.
Currently playing
Yakuza: Like a Dragon
This month
Put a chicken in charge
of a shop. That's one
way to make a buck.



LUKE KEMP
Specialist in
Hawking his wares.
Currently playing
The Falconeer,
The Pathless
This month
Diligently covered all
this month's
bird-based indies.



TYLER WILDE
Specialist in
Eating things he finds
on the floor.
Currently playing
Bugsnax
This month
Got to critique
someone else's bad
puns for once.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Making friends.
Currently playing
Watch Dogs Legion
This month
Built a deadly team of
living statues and
terminally ill writers.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Sparkling joy.
Currently playing
Empty
This month
Got into minimalism,
though mostly just as
an excuse to write
fewer words.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Ice cold justice.
Currently playing
Batman: Arkham
Origins
This month
Engaged in Christmas
fisticuffs, also known
as Christmificuffs.

VIKING INVASION

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA is the best
Assassin's Creed to date. *By Steven Messner*

My favourite Assassin's Creed is now Assassin's Creed Valhalla, which is saying something considering it's a series that spans 23 games. It builds on the already excellent RPG foundations laid by *Origins* and *Odyssey*, but with meaningful improvements that iron out many of the frustrations I had with both games. Case in point: not once during the 60-hour story was I told to stop and level up a bunch before I could take on the next quest. That also means Ubisoft isn't selling optional experience boosts, either. Thank God.

What really stands out to me, though, is how much better *Valhalla* is at telling an engaging story that twists and turns according to my decisions.

Valhalla does a great job of introducing characters, concepts, and themes, and then forcing me to decide how Eivor, the main character, relates to them. When one of my beloved clansmen betrayed me and tried

to take my life, I had no choice but to kill them in self defence. But I agonised for almost a full minute over whether to let them grasp their axe with their dying breath or kick it away, denying them entrance into Valhalla. I had come to love this character and their betrayal was upsetting, but does that justify denying them an eternity in heaven?

RAGNARÖKIN'

Set during the Viking invasion of England, the story follows Eivor and

her adoptive brother Sigurd, two fierce Norse warriors chasing glory. Like *Odyssey*, Eivor can be played as either a man or a woman, but what's

As the settlement expands, it draws new characters

great is you can now switch between them freely to test which one suits you instead of being locked into that choice from the outset. Whichever Eivor you play as, the story unfolds in mostly the same way. Sigurd was

supposed to be made a local king, but the unification of Norway under King Harald leaves him two choices: bend the knee or leave. Unwilling to give up his dream of ruling, Sigurd convinces Eivor and much of his clan to abandon Norway and sail to England so they can violently carve out a new future for themselves.

The anchor of this story is my settlement, called Ravensthorpe, which expands slowly over time as I gather new resources and construct new buildings. Like Dutch's camp in

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An enormous
Viking RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
i7 8700, RTX 2070,
16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
assassinscreed.com

Red Dead Redemption 2, the settlement is a home base that I return to frequently in between quests. New buildings unlock new upgrades, like a forge so I can enhance my equipment or a brewery so I can host feasts that give me a temporary buff to my stats. As the settlement expands, it draws new characters, sidequests and even the opportunity for romance.

Most of the story is concerned with what's happening outside the borders of my settlement, however. In order to cement a permanent place in England, Eivor and Sigurd have to negotiate alliances with the various Viking tribes (and the occasional Saxon king). This is all centred around an Alliance Map, where I choose which region I want to venture to, participating in a somewhat self-enclosed series of quests to win the favour of whichever faction happens to be there.

It takes a while before it all starts to come together, but Ubisoft does a great job juxtaposing my relationships with Sigurd and the rest of the Raven clan with the much more epic sagas as I wage war on Picts with the legendary Halfdan Ragnarrson, establish puppet kings with Ivar the Boneless, or trade veiled threats with Aelfred, King of Wessex. All the while, dialogue choices poke and prod the rigidity of Norse culture and traditions with surprising nuance. It's hard to explain without spoiling specific moments, but *Valhalla* has some wickedly knotted moral conundrums. There were a dozen or more times I stared at dialogue choices, completely stumped over which option was the right one to go for.

RANSACKED

There are still some moments where *Valhalla* feels like a bad Game of Thrones episode, though. Entire armies show up undetected at a moments notice, and characters will inexplicably change sides in a conflict just to reveal they're actually a part of ➤

SKILLING IN THE NAME OF

Some must-have abilities you should get from the skill tree



COUNTER ROLL
Let's you counter unblockable attacks by getting behind your enemy so you can stab them.



HEAVY DUAL WIELD
Dual-wield two-handed weapons to take on the hordes.



ADVANCED ASSASSINATION
Instantly assassinate higher-level enemies after a simple QTE.

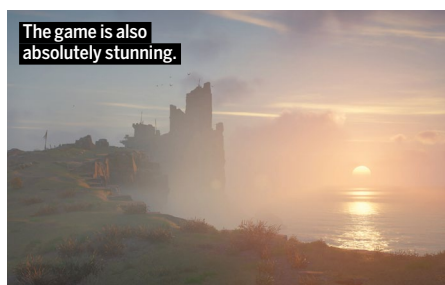


BREAKFALL
Automatically roll when falling from big heights, reducing your damage.

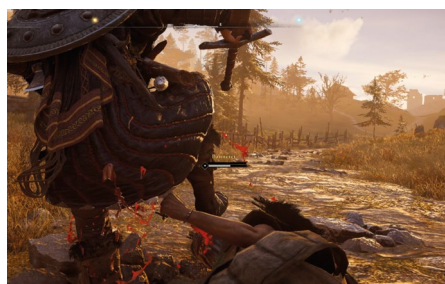
The female version of Eivor is, again, the better choice.



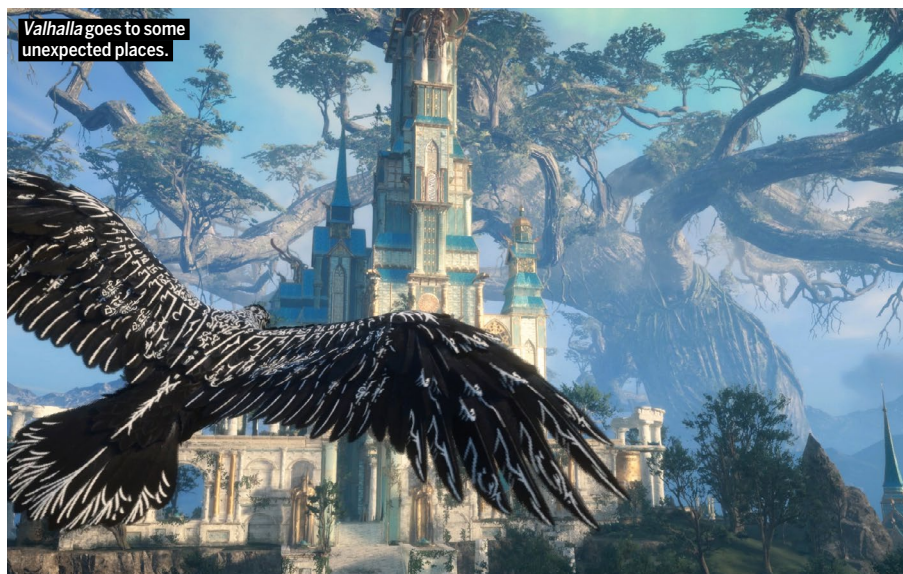
Raiding is fun a few times, but feels too shallow.



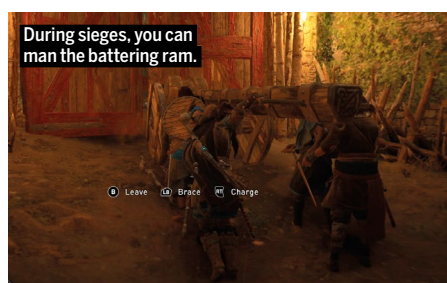
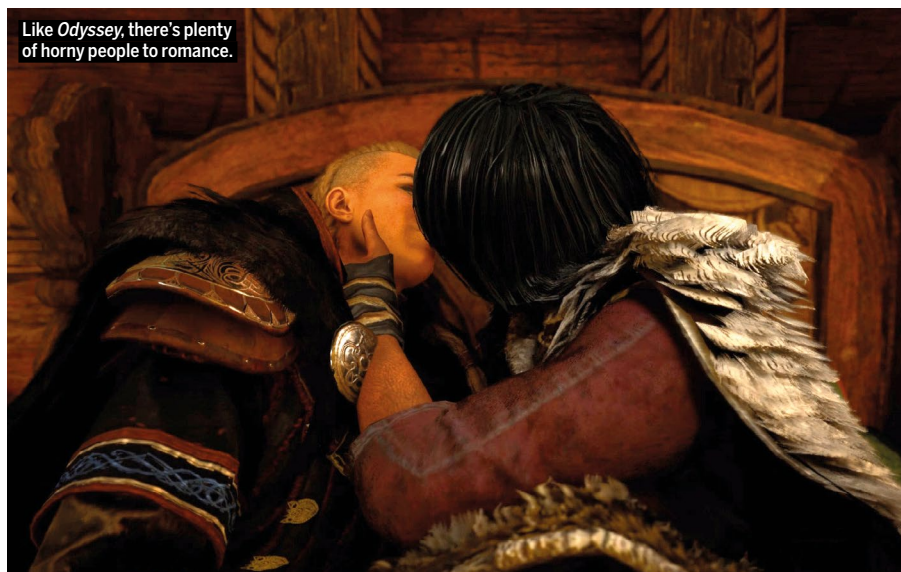
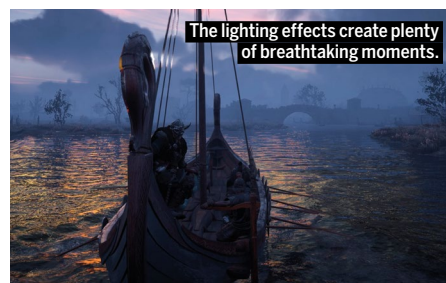
The game is also absolutely stunning.



Ubisoft's take on 9th century England is incredible.



Valhalla goes to some unexpected places.



the Templar order – the villains of the *Assassin's Creed* mythos.

These cutscenes are relatively few and far between, and ultimately this is a game about two warring cults reliving historical simulations to uncover mythological artefacts in the modern day. A bit of cheese is expected. But, and I can't believe I'm about to say this, *Valhalla* even makes *Assassin's Creed's* sloppy overarching meta-narrative interesting again. Without spoiling anything, the final two hours are a whirlwind of revelations with implications that stretch all the way back to the first game. God help me, I actually want to see what happens next.

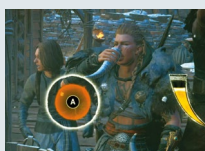
The Viking fantasy is great, but there are times when Ubisoft pulls punches in a way that is frustrating and clumsy. Take raiding, for example. To gather resources to expand my settlement, I have to pillage Christian monasteries dotted along the various riverways of England's different kingdoms. The first few times I did this, it was exhilarating: my soldiers stormed the town, hurling torches onto thatched-roof cottages, slaughtering the guards, breaking windows, shattering pots and crates, and helping me kick down doors to get at more valuable loot. But God help you if you kill an unarmed clergyman, even by accident. Kill too many and it's game over. Burning their entire lives to the ground, however, is totally OK.

I'm not saying *Valhalla* should gleefully reward you for butchering Christians, but including a hard rule against it feels like the developer intervening to wag a finger in my face. It's even stranger when I start a quest with a Saxon lord who completely ignores the fact that I pillaged every church in his lands on the way to meet him. It makes raiding feel like a shallow feature clumsily stitched on to the rest of the game rather than something incorporated into and accounted for by the story.

AXE, MEET SKULL

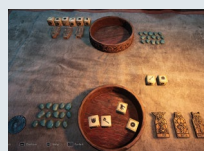
Some of these issues would be a lot more frustrating if combat weren't so much fun. The system is similar to *Odyssey's* in a lot of ways, but much more satisfying. For example, I can now dual-wield any two weapons,

GAME DAY *When you're not hewing off limbs, there's some fun side stuff*



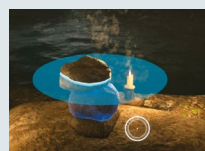
GET DRUNK

Challenge locals to a drinking competition that you both will lose.



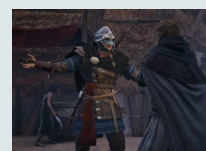
ORLOG

A surprisingly complex and strategic game of dice. Roll them!



BUILDING CAIRNS

Stacking rocks on top of each other. It's really very soothing stuff.



FLYTING

Viking rap battles. Outwit your opponent with your lyrical flow and win cash.

changing my combat style while also giving me access to special moves unique to my offhand weapon. Playing on a harder difficulty, I immediately favoured the traditional axe and shield for the extra defence. But then I unlocked an ability on *Valhalla's* skill tree that let me dual-wield two-handed weapons. What a game changer.

Instead of sporting a measly axe, I'm holding a two-handed battle axe in one hand and a spear in the other. Or I can hold two spears and be extra stabby, or two shields and be extra shieldy. It's so much fun discovering all of these combinations.

It's also hard to overstate just how gnarly some of the finishing moves are. I've repeatedly knocked enemies

down and then impaled them on their own spears, or chopped their hands off as they raised them to defend against the axe I was about to lodge in their skull. There's even one where Eivor sticks an

axe in a guy's face and then punches his head off. It's exactly what you'd hope for in a game about Vikings.

Of course, stealth is still an option, but it's quickly becoming the most antiquated part of *Assassin's Creed* – if only because so little of it has changed. *Valhalla* brings back some cool features like being able to blend into crowds to avoid guards and creating distractions to draw them away, but I'm often frustrated by how shitty the AI continues to be. At least *Valhalla* is more willing to let me forgo stealth entirely in all but a few quests. Being a sneaky Viking doesn't feel appropriate, anyway.

Fortunately, Eivor has more tools than just the weapons she wields. While exploring, special books can

be found that unlock new abilities, like being able to set your weapon on fire or a harpoon you can use to yank enemies off cliffs. This, coupled with a skill tree that recalls *Path of Exile* – hundreds of nodes that offer incremental stat boosts mixed with ability unlocks – makes customising Eivor feel deeply satisfying.

This all feeds back into the open-world exploration, which remains largely untouched from *Odyssey* save for a few improvements. The map is still littered with icons in typical Ubisoft fashion, but you can (and should) turn that all off in the options so that you can just explore without signposts everywhere. Most of the stuff you'll find is new equipment and treasure you can take back home or use for upgrades, but I also found hidden caves with challenging puzzles, secret boss battles, and weird little one-off quests that are often bizarre and sometimes absolutely hilarious. Instead of a checklist of things to do, it feels more like an organic world I actually want to fully explore.

These little improvements go a long way in making *Valhalla* more inviting and fun than *Odyssey*. *Assassin's Creed's* transformation into a full-blown RPG hasn't been the cleanest one, especially as features like stealth feel left to stagnate while other aspects get so much better. But *Valhalla* succeeds on so many levels that it's easy to forgive the times when it doesn't. It's an enormous game, and it'll probably take me another 20 hours to finish everything I still haven't completed. I honestly can't wait. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Bloody and captivating, *Valhalla* is *Assassin's Creed* at its best. And the setting injects some new life into the formula.

92



DRAGON QUEST

YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON doubles down on the series' RPG elements with a brave new turn-based battle system. *By Andy Kelly*

Playing a *Yakuza* game without series stalwart Kazuma Kiryu in the leading role takes some getting used to. But luckily for *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, it's easy to warm to new hero Ichiban Kasuga. He has all the strength and determination of his predecessor, but with a goofy sense of humour and an endearing enthusiasm for everything he does – whether that's taking on the Korean mafia or employing a chicken to run a sweet shop.

Ichiban starts out as a low-level yakuza in Kamurocho, the Tokyo red light district that serves as the main setting for most of the *Yakuza* games. But after a series of unfortunate events, he ends up homeless in Yokohama. *Yakuza:*

Like a Dragon is about Ichi getting his life back together, reckoning with his past, and beating a lot of people up along the way.

In many ways, this is classic *Yakuza*. It features an immersive, detailed urban Japanese setting filled with minigames, absurd sidequests and karaoke bars. The story is an unlikely mix of criminal conspiracy, heartfelt melodrama and slapstick comedy. And when a problem arises, it's usually solved with outlandish violence. If you've played any *Yakuza* game before, its distinctive rhythms and quirks will be instantly familiar.

However, when it comes to the combat, this is anything but a typical *Yakuza* game. The usual combo-based brawling has been replaced by a new turn-based battle system. It's pretty standard JRPG fare, with buffs, debuffs, status effects, and a mix of weapon-based and magic attacks. The vibrant presentation, superb animation and lively pace make up for its simplicity, but selecting things from a menu does lack the satisfying brutality and immediacy of a standard real-time *Yakuza* fight.

There are some real-time elements. Hit the block button at the precise moment an enemy's attack lands and the damage you take will be reduced. And the power of some special abilities can be boosted by following simple QTE prompts.

DRAGON PUNCH

The problem is, there's far too much fighting. Yokohama isn't as dense or storied as Kamurocho, despite being several times its size, but the developer's knack for evocatively capturing the mundane details of everyday life in Japan is as strong as ever. I just wish I could enjoy the place at my own pace without running into large groups of enemies every 30 seconds.

In previous *Yakuza* games you'd frequently get stopped on the street by thugs looking for a

When it comes to the combat, this is anything but a typical *Yakuza* game

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A new take on the *Yakuza* series inspired by classic JRPGs

EXPECT TO PAY

£55

DEVELOPER

Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

PUBLISHER

Sega

REVIEWED ON

RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

likeadragon.sega.com

fight, but the battles were over pretty quickly and seamlessly. Here, the endless transitioning in and out of turn-based battles really ruins the flow of exploration.

You feel like you're being interrupted, rather than these encounters being an organic part of the world. And the sheer volume of battles means the novelty of your party's ludicrous special abilities soon wears thin, which in turn makes the combat incredibly repetitive.

This extends to the dungeons too. These maze-like collections of bland corridors are filled with rubbish loot and non-stop battles, marking a real low point for the series.

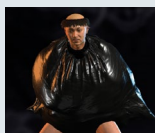
It's a shame, because when the combat isn't grinding you down, *Like a Dragon* has moments of brilliance. I love hanging out with my party between missions, singing karaoke, bullshitting, and knocking back beers. The characters are as colourful and interesting as you'd expect from the series – especially Nanba, a tough but kind-hearted homeless guy who gets some of the game's funniest lines.

The *Yakuza* games have always told great stories, but *Like a Dragon* lacks the thrill and focus of *Yakuza 0*. There are some standout scenes, especially in the first few acts. Ichiban crawling out of the gutter and trying to make a name for himself in Yokohama are some of the best moments in the game. But the overall narrative is quite weak, with a meandering pace and some slightly ridiculous twists towards the end.

Like a Dragon is one of the most uneven *Yakuza* games in the series. A lot of the time you can't help but get swept up by its eccentric charm. Then, at other times, you're praying for the battles to end as you traipse through another series of corridors. ■

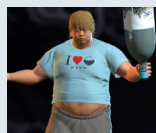
FREAK SHOW

Some of the weirder enemies you'll face



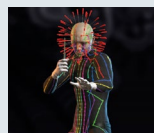
PSEUDOTRASH

This oddball disguises himself as a bin bag and ambushes you as you walk by.



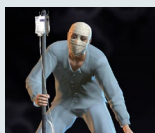
DINE-AND-DASHER

Big lads who are the scourge of Yokohama's streets.



WELTRAISE

A body piercing fanatic who has modified himself so much that he no longer feels pain.



IMP PATIENT

A patient who has escaped from his ward. Sneezes on you and gives you a debilitating cold.



TURNCOAT TITILLATOR

Creeps who inflict negative status effects by dancing suggestively.



FASHION POLICE

A fashionista who attacks anyone he sees who has zero fashion sense.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A fun, charming, and occasionally brilliant *Yakuza* game, let down by an overabundance of turn-based battles.

72

Grumpy, booze-loving cop
Adachi is the party's tank.



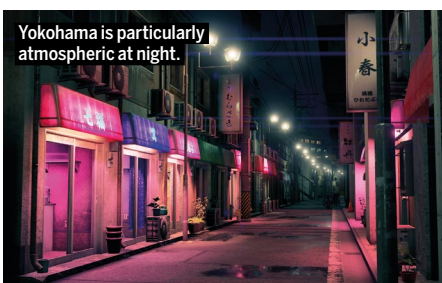
It's nice playing as someone
a bit cheerier than Kiryu.



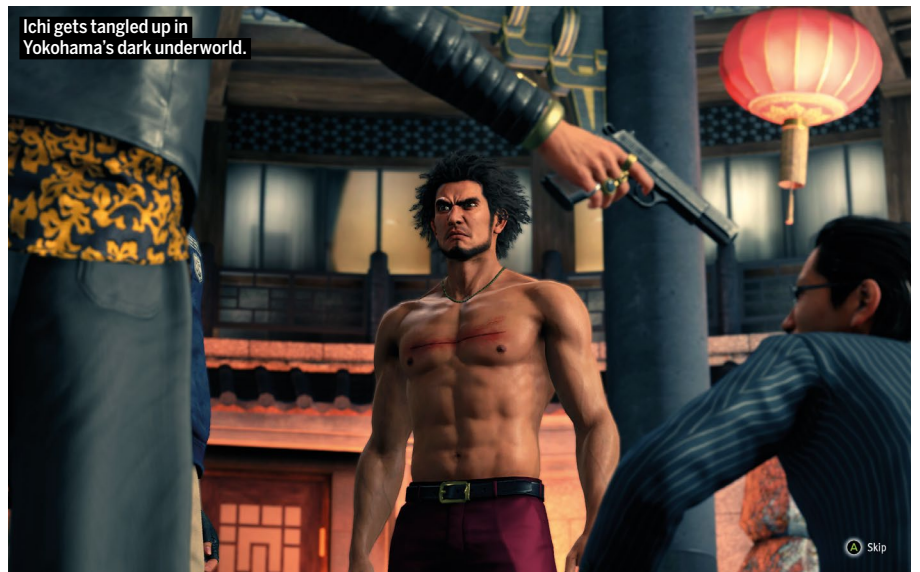
This is the wildest collection
of Yakuza enemies yet.



Yokohama is particularly
atmospheric at night.



Ichi gets tangled up in
Yokohama's dark underworld.



STUCK IN THE MUD

DIRT 5 ventures down a well-travelled track. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

Who and what is *Dirt 5* for? I don't know the answer, and I'm not sure Codemasters does either. After all, this is a series that made a name by injecting a bit of extreme sports culture into the *Colin McRae Rally* series, which was itself beginning to feel a bit warmed-up by 2007. *Colin McRae: Dirt* was fresh and fun, chucking its pace-notes out of the passenger window and doing a doughnut just because it felt like it.

The problem, is that recently *Dirt Rally* and its sequel came along. Lovely, strait-laced *Dirt Rally*. It was so brilliant it reminded us how much we missed pace-notes, and realistic offroad handling, and drizzly Welsh lanes. Just like that, we like the old style of rally game again. The one *Dirt* was invented to revitalise.

Which leaves game number 5 without a clear raison d'être. All the core elements, its essential *Dirt*-osity, were devised as a deliberate departure from sim-minded, realistic driving. But right now, as *Dirt Rally 2* enjoys a passionate community and sim-racing esports gain momentum, sim-minded, realistic driving is exactly where the excitement is.

Of course, you might really fancy a non-taxing racer, where braking is genuinely optional and a familiar pyramid of events wraps itself around

you from the career menu like a comfort blanket. We all fancy that sometimes, and *Dirt 5* is those things, certainly – it's just a very familiar version of those things.

The handling model doesn't want to step out at the back and have you wrestling to find balance. It wants to comply. You can toss most vehicles into most corners with a quick lift of the throttle and emerge more or less on the pace. And, ah yes,

there's the wedge of race events in the career mode menu, each with medals for arbitrary tasks. As you'd expect, cars can be daubed in colours and vinyls and sponsor stickers until they're ready to detach your retina.

From structure to track design to presentation to handling, it's all exactly what you expect to find in a *Dirt* game, delivered without surprises or noticeable steps forward.

It's all a bit civilised, even in the ice racing events

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An offroad racer with a splash of *Tony Hawk's* that doesn't like braking

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Codemasters

PUBLISHER
Codemasters

REVIEWED ON
i7 9700K, RTX 2080 Ti, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 12

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1038250/DIRT_5/

Surprises aren't in abundance on the track either. There's a lot of fireworks and confetti and pyrotechnics going off as you hit a jump, but AI drivers don't mix it with you or with each other as they would in a *GRID* game. It's all a bit civilised, even in the ice racing events, which prove something of a highlight throughout career mode. There are plenty of other event types – they just don't discern themselves very well.

DIG THE DIRT

What you do get a sense of, as you plunge down the next hill or launch into an outrageously cambered hairpin, is geographical variation. There's no missing the fact you're racing in China, or Italy, or Norway, or NYC. This sense of touring the world adds much-needed interest to your career since the different event types don't distinguish themselves very clearly other than the infrequent one-on-one showdowns.

It's at this point that it should be acknowledged that a team of hundreds of people worked tirelessly and adapted to working at home in order to put this game out. Doing so is an achievement in itself, and despite some minor performance issues in the Steam review build, *Dirt 5* doesn't bear the scars of an unusual development process.

So *Dirt 5* isn't a bad game, then. Whereas *Project CARS 3* seems to be jutting out its chin and actively daring you to find something of the franchise's prior identity which you liked among its new mess of utterly characterless racing, *Dirt 5* is guilty of the opposite. Instead of jettisoning its identity it's playing too safe, holding onto it too closely in search of the apocryphal casual racing gamer who's scared of brake pedals. ■

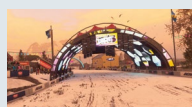
PC GAMER VERDICT

Codemasters' *Dirt 5* offers up some arcade offroad racing of the sort we've played four times previously.

60

AROUND THE WORLD

Dirt 5, travel correspondent



NORWAY

Rolling hills of delicious snow. Aurora Borealis? Every night mate.



UNITED STATES

A frozen tundra punctuated only by icy puddles.



CHINA

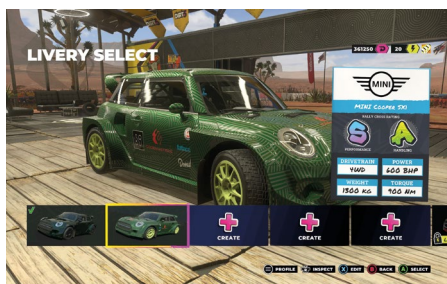
Where bamboo and lasers meet. Ancient and modern at once.



GREECE

Look at the quality of these roads? Where did all that EU money go?

Some of Norway's layouts take on an enticing, driveable ski slope vibe.



PRETTY FALCON GOOD

Talon stories of good vs eagle in the world of

THE FALCONER. By Luke Kemp

Despite all the dialogue and narration, I walked away from this game with the most important question of all unanswered; are they tiny people, or huge birds? I like riding on the back of a falcon as much as the next person, but give me a sense of perspective! This didn't bother me during play, as I was too busy gawping at the graphics and shooting down enemies; but it sat at the back of my mind throughout the adventure.

The Falconeer takes place in a unique world that sits somewhere outside our own, a world that slowly drew me in as I progressed through the story. A huge expanse of water littered with islands controlled by warring factions, the tale that this place tells is interesting enough to prevent you from skipping through the NPC chatter that precedes each mission.

As a falconeer, you'll dive to increase speed and flap in place to reduce it, stretching your falcon's wings out to turn when necessary. The accompanying squawks, flaps, and screeches work in tandem with the wonderful animation to give a convincing sense of being in control of a bird. Or at least, a small/normal sized person on top of one.

While the shooting would feel at home in a WWII dogfighting game, it feels perfectly natural here. Although activities broadly fall into one of three categories (attack, defence, delivery), I never found myself getting bored of

them. *The Falconeer* is a joy to control no matter what you're doing, and not just because you're rather amusingly given a barrel roll evasion move.

Now, I ordinarily *hate* escort missions, and there are several of those here. Yet accompanying a ship on its slow but steady journey doesn't bother me in the slightest. Nothing going on for a while? Who cares? Have you *seen* those graphics? This is a gorgeous game, and I'll

relish any opportunity to soak up its vistas while enjoying the simple fun of flying my falcon. Once combat makes its inevitable appearance, it's a pleasing aerial dance between me and, usually, just a few enemies before we continue on our way.

WING WING, HELLO?

However, there are no checkpoints, and this is a big issue for these missions. If I die partway through, I need to start all over again. I then find myself circling the ship in

The Falconeer is a joy to control no matter what you're doing

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A game that gives you a gun and a giant falcon (or a tiny person)

EXPECT TO PAY

£25

DEVELOPER

Tomas Sala

PUBLISHER

Wired Productions

REVIEWED ON

GeForce GTX 1650,
Ryzen 5 3550H,
8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

thefalconeer.com

agitation, impatiently awaiting a fight that I know is coming while the ship merrily chugs along at what is now a frustratingly slow pace.

One small but noticeable issue is the cash awarded for completing story or side missions (needed for items such as weapon and falcon upgrades), which often isn't proportionate to the effort involved. An optional quest that takes just a few minutes might pay as much as a lengthy story mission, which doesn't make any sense. And while you're given clear direction for story missions, you're left to fend for yourself when it comes to exploring the open world outside of them, with nothing but the names of locations ever marked on your map.

Difficulty throughout the story is all over the place, with no smooth gradient. Significant difficulty spikes are rare, but very annoying when they hit, to the point where I eventually kicked the difficulty down to Easy to soften (but not negate) their effect. Also, having an ally for most story missions is a nice touch, and they always pull their weight – but they won't always follow instructions (limited to 'hit this target' or 'get this enemy off my back').

Despite these criticisms – and despite the absence of the option to automatically target a chasing enemy – the game still, mostly, shines. It says a lot that although optional missions are hollow instructions along the lines of 'go here' or 'kill that', I still eagerly dived into them for the extra cash. Any excuse to go back out into this intriguing world, I'll take.

The lack of direction outside of the story is as much a blessing as it is a curse, leaving long-term appeal up for debate. Even so, this is a flight you should take if you get the chance. ■

WING AND A PRAYER

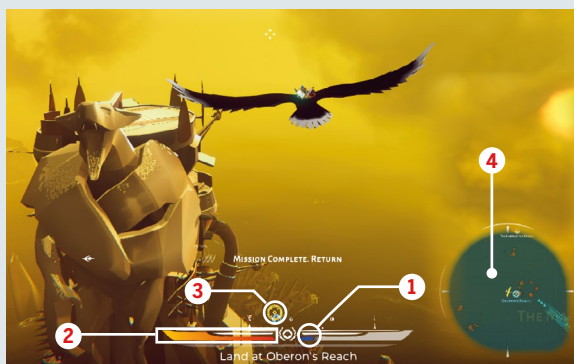
Decoding the UI

1 This bar powers boost and roll. Refill with dives and updrafts.

2 Your health. Don't let this disappear, or you'll be an ex-parrot.

3 Keep this in the centre, and you know you're on the right track.

4 Your minimap. Bizarrely, it doesn't show enemy locations.

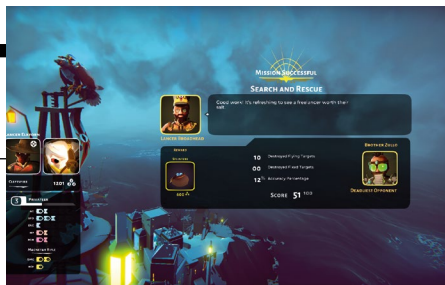


PC GAMER

VERDICT

Despite a little turbulence, *The Falconeer* takes you on a memorable ride as you swoop through the sky.

78



If you liked it then you should've put a wing on it



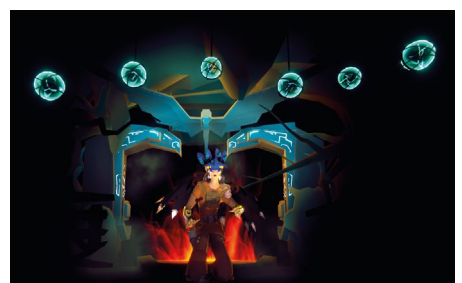
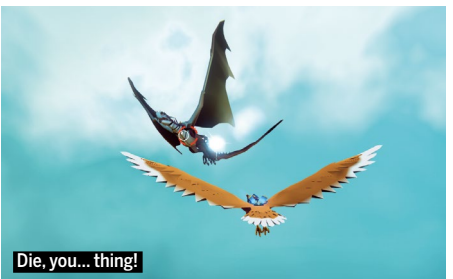
Try telling me that doesn't look lovely.



I'm too old for this ship.



Incredibly, the game uses no premade textures.



ANOTHER BUG-HUNT

Hunting **BUGSNAX** isn't as much fun as hanging out with its cast of grumpuses. *By Tyler Wilde*

The bugsnax that affected me most is the weenyworm. A weenyworm is a hot dog (with bun) that squiggles around in a circle saying “weenyworm” in a sing-songy voice I’d describe as ‘nasal’ if that didn’t imply a nose, which weenyworms don’t have. “Weeny... weenyworm,” it says again and again as it circles, waiting for me to capture it and feed it to a grumpus – a furry person, more or less, whose body parts turn into the bugsnax they eat.

Bizarrely, grumpuses love turning into bugsnax. And they aren’t Justin Roiland-style shrieking monsters. They’re regular people, albeit bean-like and snaggletoothed. They’re cute, actually, and when they aren’t becoming snack foods, they even edge past wackiness and sentimentality and slice into human experience. I didn’t care for the actual bugsnax catching in *Bugsnax*, but working through the grumpuses’ insecurities was sweet – like a sweetiefly or a sprinklepede, perhaps.

As you may have guessed, the bugsnax are literally bug-like snacks: grapeskeetos, pineantulas, sandopedes, and so on. You play as a nameless journalist who has been summoned to investigate these bugsnax by their discoverer, dashing adventurer Lizbert Megafig. Except, when you arrive at Lizbert’s island, she and her partner Eggabell are both missing, and the settlement they established is in ruins. The grumpuses who followed them there have scattered to the island’s conveniently distinct biomes to do their own things – all except hapless mayor Filbo, who enlists your help to reunite the town and find Lizbert and Eggabell. It’s all up to you now.

Over the course of seven-to-ten hours, you’ll locate the scattered townsfolk in a forest glade, on the beach, among desert mesas, in an alpine forest, and on the peak of a volcanic mountain. Of course, none of them will come back to town straight away: you have to capture and feed them certain bugsnax to help them fulfil their objectives first.

There are a variety of bugsnax-catching tools, but they all have very limited use cases, so *Bugsnax* is often just a matching game. Use the trap device on these kinds of bugsnax, but not these. Use the grappling hook on this one, but not that one. Shoot peanut butter on this bugnax to make it fall, and ketchup on that one to make its friend ram into it and knock it out. The closest I got to doing something creative was when I

used my portable spring-loaded launcher to hurl a flaming bowl of noodles off the side of a cliff and then lured it into a pond with hot sauce, extinguishing its flames so that I

As you may have guessed, the bugsnax are literally bug-like snacks

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A singleplayer adventure on an island populated with snack-based bugs

EXPECT TO PAY
£18

DEVELOPER
Young Horses

PUBLISHER
Young Horses

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 2070 Super

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK
bugsnax.com

could pick it up. It was more awkward than satisfying, like herding a cat with clown props. There were also a few times I felt I might’ve been hindered by bugs (the software kind), but bugsnax hunting is such a sloppy business that it was hard to tell.

The consolation is that you don’t have to catch all that many bugsnax. Following the main quests, you only need to trap whatever bugsnax the grumpuses ask you to feed them. I didn’t bother much with optional snax, because the characters are the highlight of *Bugsnax*, not the hunting.

MONSTER MUNCH

The leads, Lizbert and Eggabell, are missing, so their story plays out in video diaries. Fryda Wolff’s performance as Eggabell is the highlight – at moments I really ached for the character, an egg-shaped fur creature who is obsessed with eating bugs that are also snacks. Wolff benefits from Eggabell being the best-observed character, a powder keg of self-doubt. Also great are Snorpy, a standoffish scientist who likes to give hugs, and his buff boyfriend Chandlo, who likes lifting and seeking spiritual peace. The mystery’s resolution doesn’t disappoint, either. And reveals the cast’s obsession with eating and becoming bugsnax isn’t just wacky for the sake of wackiness.

I wish *Bugsnax* was more fun, but its cheerful grampus body horror did change me, ever so slightly, and £18 is a fair price for its weird, grisly story (at the end, it might be a bit dark for little kids). I suspect it’s better shared with someone who can laugh with you than played alone at a monitor, having your sense of self eroded by the repetition of the words “weeny, weenyworm”. ■

GROAN

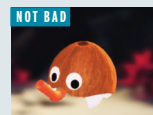
Bugsnax’s bug-snack combos aren’t all hits. Here are some of the best and worst



SANDOPEDE
They can chain into a multi-segment sub sandopepe.



SPRINKLEPEDE
Now you’re just sticking ‘pede’ on words.



COCOMITE
Sounds kind of like ‘coconut’, but it’s a mite. Sure.



HUNNABEE
A honey bee is already a thing, so is this wordplay?



BUFFALOCUST
A buffalo wing locust that dives into hot sauce.

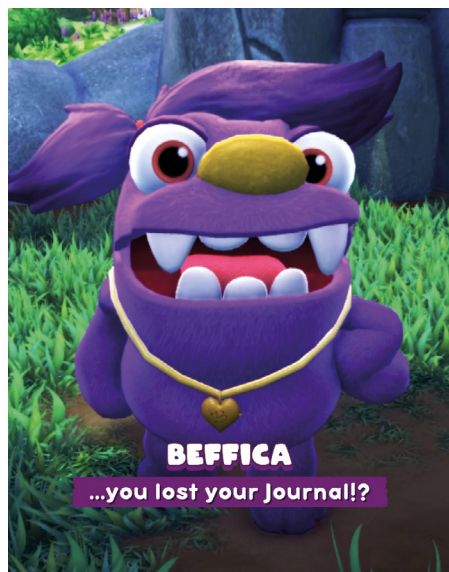


TACOROACH
Only works if you pronounce ‘cockroach’ funny.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Bugsnax is a weird little story with loveable characters, but the actual bug hunting isn’t all that much fun.

60



ROAD NOT TAKEN

THE PATHLESS goes in the right direction. *By Luke Kemp*

When your enemy is called The Godslayer, you might hope to have more to hand than a bow and arrow and an eagle. In fact, this is a game notable in part for what it doesn't have. It's an open-world game with no minimap, no fast travel, no player deaths, no enemies (apart from bosses), no NPCs and no vehicles. Yet what it *does* have has been so expertly crafted, that the end result is something truly remarkable.

This isn't easily comparable to anything else, something that becomes apparent within seconds of taking your first dash across a field. Your sprint is powered by your spirit meter, which is depleted rapidly but can be constantly topped up by shooting the many floating talismans scattered throughout the entire game.

Even shooting arrows is nothing like a traditional action game. When you get close enough to a target and/or point the camera towards it, it's automatically highlighted, and all you need to do is to hold down a button for a second or two, and then release.

Travelling on foot at speed is almost an extended (but enjoyable) QTE. You rush to your destination while carefully timing shots to keep that meter active. It makes simply moving from one place to another into a light challenge and a joy.

Your hunter has a special power: spirit vision. The genius of this idea

comes to light once you start trying to work out what to do and where to go. There is no map, and no waypoints. Engage spirit vision, and everything turns a shade of blue, with distant areas of interest pulsing red. There's often no indication of precisely what might be there, but you can guarantee that it'll be worthwhile.

The world offers puzzles in place of enemies, and I've yet to find a single one I didn't enjoy.

They test your brain without being obnoxious. This isn't an indication of puzzles that are too easy, but rather another sign of the developer's philosophy of allowing the game to be an experience of constant motion.

EAGLE AID

I have two criticisms. Firstly, before you're ready to face them, each area's boss will sometimes trigger an event whereby you're separated from your eagle. You then need to slowly creep over to rescue it,

stopping whenever the big bad's gaze falls your way. This starts to become tiresome after you've done it a few times.

Secondly, once you've got your bird back, you need to cleanse it by simulating a stroking motion all over until all of the curse juice is gone. I know this is meant to build a bond, but it too becomes a little annoying. Also, one of the boss fights went on a bit too long when I struggled to hit multiple weak spots in a row. OK, fine; three criticisms.

These are, at worst, minor annoyances. I can't stay angry at this game. The main motivation for The Godslayer's evil deeds is a desire to provide everybody with a strict path to follow in life, which seems to be something of a commentary on Giant Squid's approach to designing the game.

While bosses follow a fairly rigid pattern – a chase to hit weak spots, an arena fight to hit weak spots, then one or two final stages to hit weak spots – the bulk of the game does not. You 'unlock' boss fights by collecting and using certain items, but each area of the map has more than you actually need. The items you collect, and the order in which you collect them, are dependent on nothing more than where your curiosity takes you.

The story comes to an epic and very satisfying end, after which I gleefully jumped back in to start mopping up the remainder of the puzzles. The cherry on top of this delicious gaming cake is the soundtrack, a wonderful Austin Wintory score that incorporates the superb sounds of Tuvan throat singing ensemble Alash. *The Pathless* sacrifices difficulty at the altar of fun, and I am very much here for it. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An open-world game done very, very right

EXPECT TO PAY

£32

DEVELOPER

Giant Squid

PUBLISHER

Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON

GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

thepathless.com

Travelling on foot at speed is almost an extended (but enjoyable) QTE

NAVIGATING THE PATHLESS *What's all this, then?*

1 Cleanse three of these towers, and the boss fight is on!

2 The Godslayer lives up here. I pity the postman.

3 Your spirit meter. Keep this topped up and you'll do just fine.

4 This is a tree. That's nice, innit?



PC GAMER VERDICT

Offering up a smooth and mesmerising experience, *The Pathless* takes you exactly where it wants you.

85

Looking and feeling cool.



Find these to help increase how high you can fly.



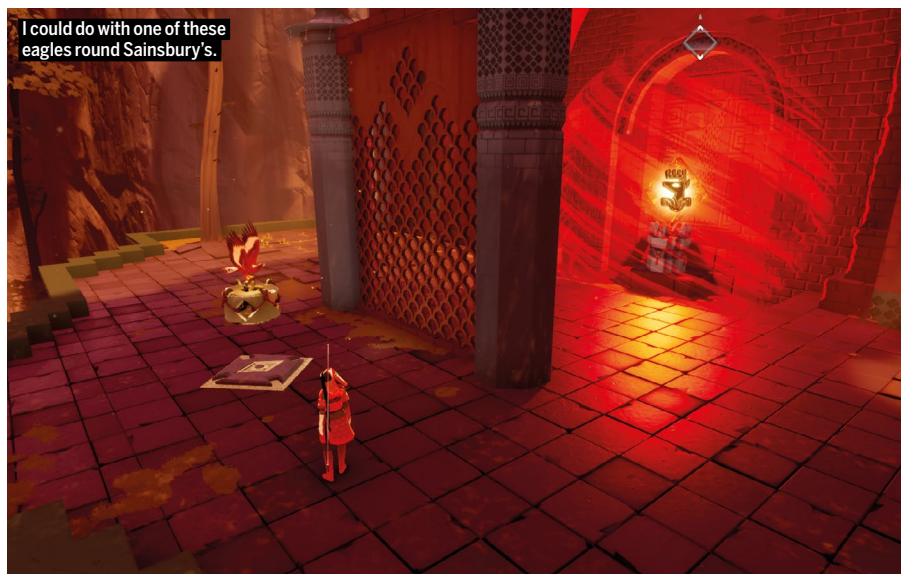
"What you lookin' at?"



Pull your neck in, mate.



I could do with one of these eagles round Sainsbury's.



SCOOBY GANG

LITTLE HOPE is a ghost tour that's better with friends. *By Fraser Brown*

Cerebral horror is fine, but I like my scares to come from monster chases and stuff jumping out of the shadows. Idiots in peril, abandoned towns, maybe some ghosts – that's where I get my thrills. *Little Hope*, the second game in the Dark Pictures Anthology, has all of that, along with multiplayer modes that help it simultaneously capture the experience of watching and being inside a goofy horror flick with your pals.

Like its predecessor, *Man of Medan*, it's through the co-op modes that the game reveals all of its mysteries. In singleplayer, you'll control different members of the stranded quintet, trapped in the town of Little Hope by fog and plagued by visions of 17th century witch trials. The shared story, however, lets you experience these scenes from a different perspective, and when the game splits you up, you'll have to rely on your co-op buddy, listening to them investigate ruined buildings or get ambushed by a monster, with only a QTE between them and death.

The frantic QTE sequences made me feel like I was always just about to die, but they're actually easygoing. To make them more accessible, there are unobtrusive alerts ahead of the prompts now warning you that a QTE is coming. This extra second to prepare doesn't diminish their impact, but it does make it less likely that you'll hit the wrong button.

Little Hope is a social game. You can enjoy it on your lonesome, but you'll miss out the best parts. You're meant to yell, swap theories about why the gang is trapped and develop these characters together. After every surprise, I found myself hitting pause so we could talk about what just happened and build the full picture from our individual perspectives. This was the magic that made *Man of Medan* work, too, and good co-op

can make it easy to overlook places where the game is less refined. But *Little Hope* doesn't really develop it further, and it actually takes advantage of it less. Where *Man of Medan* used it to foster paranoia and sow distrust between players, *Little Hope's* approach to co-op seems more straightforward.

ABANDON HOPE

There's still lots of character drama, mind you. The gang is made up of three students in their 20s, a mature

student and their professor. Two of them are dating, but nobody really gets along that well in *Little Hope*. They're stressed, but they're also just kinda dicks, with one bland exception. They're all familiar archetypes, like the vanilla do-gooder, the tense academic and the Queen of Karens. Being painted in broad strokes makes it easier to slip into their personalities when you take control of them, though, and while none of these characters are particularly nuanced, most of them are fun roleplaying subjects.

Between QTEs and conversations are opportunities to explore, mostly by looking at objects the game clearly highlights. The camera has been freed up to give you more control, and while there aren't any puzzles, Supermassive uses the time to ramp up the tension and tease some hints about what's really going on.

Sometimes its cinematic notions get the better of it, however, and the camera abruptly switches to a dramatic angle, like maybe you're being watched from some bushes. Perfectly fine for a movie, maybe, but every single time this happened, my co-op partner and I stopped in our tracks because we thought we'd hit a cutscene. There are quite a few awkward scene transitions, too, or places where the pace abruptly speeds up and it's not clear what the heck is actually going on.

Most of the time, though, it's like being stuck in a schlocky horror movie. It's *Final Destination* meets *The Crucible*, where you're watching yourself die one minute and attending a dimly lit witch trial the next. The co-op doesn't impress quite as much as it did in *Man of Medan*, but this is still one of the best ways to get spooked with some mates. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A choice-laden horror game with some great co-op modes

EXPECT TO PAY

£25

DEVELOPER

Supermassive Games

PUBLISHER

Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON

GTX 1080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

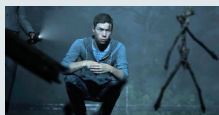
LINK

thedarkpictures.com

Nobody really gets along that well in Little Hope

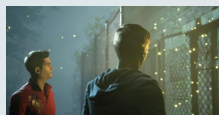
HALLOWEEN PARTY

Here are the three ways you can play *Little Hope*



SOLO

On your own, you can still play as each member of the group and get a favourable ending, and you might find it a little scarier.



SHARED STORY

This is an online-only co-op option for two players that lets you experience scenes from a different perspective.



MOVIE NIGHT

You'll need four friends to make the most out of this one, which is an offline co-op mode where everyone takes turns.

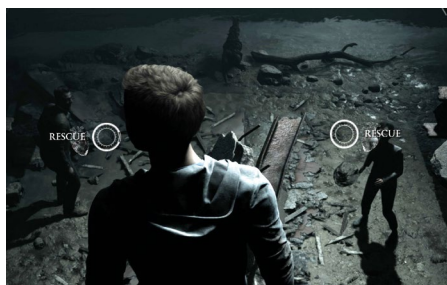
PC GAMER

VERDICT

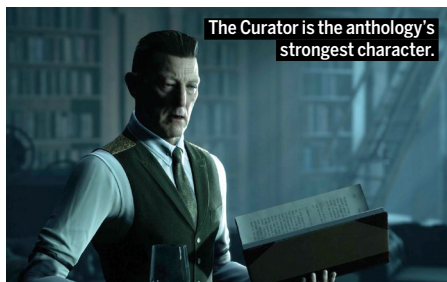
While *Little Hope* is not quite as novel as its predecessor, the co-op is still bewitching and offers up some scares.

74

Nobody in Little Hope pays their electric bill, so it's perpetually dark.



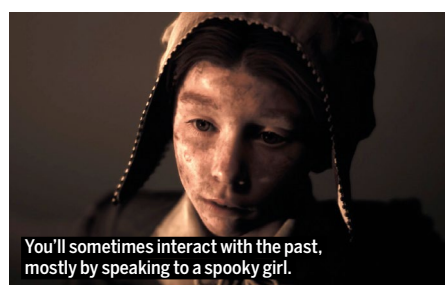
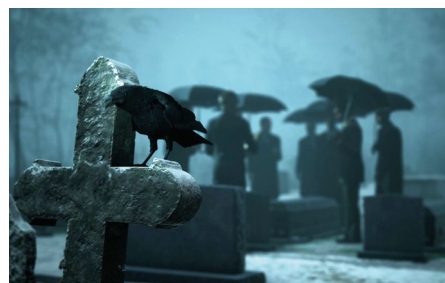
The Curator is the anthology's strongest character.



Don't you just want to give him a big kiss right where his lips used to be?



He doesn't look thrilled about exploring this obviously haunted house.



You'll sometimes interact with the past, mostly by speaking to a spooky girl.

LONDON BRAWLING

Liberate the city with buskers and beekeepers
in **WATCH DOGS LEGION**. By Chris Livingston

A couple of hours into *Watch Dogs Legion* I look at my small team of DedSec agents and think to myself: these people actually suck. The concept seems sound – rather than playing a traditional protagonist, you recruit a team of heroes from randomly generated, ordinary citizens of London. The problem with ordinary people, though, is that they're ordinary. I have a filmmaker on my team. An ambulance driver. A legal assistant. A lady whose only skill is that she owns a car.

It's not exactly a dream team, and initially I'm so uninterested in my collection of 'heroes' that when one of them (the car owning lady) is kidnapped by an enemy I don't even bother rescuing her. Go ahead and keep her, I shrug. I can steal a car if I need one.

But a few hours and several new recruits later, another member of my team is kidnapped, and this time I fly into an absolute rage. This is another team member who owns a car, but it's an extremely fast car because he's a getaway driver. He has a skill that prevents police drones from chasing him while he's driving, and another skill that forces every car in his path off the road, parting traffic like the Red Sea. Both are indispensable to me. He also has a cool leather jacket and driving gloves and shades – he

just looks like a driver from an action movie. I like this guy a lot, and I like playing as him, and the thought of some enemy stealing him from me is absolutely unacceptable. That's when I realise *Legion's* play-as-anyone system is actually working for me, and that I've gotten invested in it. It just took a while to assemble a team of anyones I actually cared about.

DedSec has been framed for a series of terrorist bombings

PEOPLE PERSON

In *Watch Dogs Legion*, hacker group DedSec has been framed for a series of terrorist bombings in London, and its members are all dead, missing, or jailed. An oppressive private military firm, Albion, is now running London, a ruthless mob boss is running drugs, weapons and human trafficking operations in the city, and there's also government intelligence and a

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open-world action stealth game set in a dystopian future London

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Coming in December

LINK
ubisoft.com/en-us/game/watch-dogs/watch-dogs

billionaire tech mogul to contend with. Starting from scratch with a single, largely unremarkable citizen, I slowly assemble a new DedSec crew to fight back against Albion.

Looking for new recruits in London is an engrossing and time-consuming activity in and of itself. Scanning citizens as I pass them on the street or peeking at them through security cameras gives me a look at their attributes, both good and bad. An elderly mechanic might wield a heavy wrench for melee attacks but have low mobility and damage resistance due to his age. A medic may have a uniform, useful for infiltrating hospitals, and a dart gun for non-lethal takedowns, but they also might be a compulsive gambler who will regularly lose DedSec's money. A beekeeper I met has the ability to send swarms of cyberbees to attack targets, but also has incurable hiccups that can alert guards when they're trying to be stealthy. Every trip through the city adds someone new to your shopping list, either because they seem useful, like a hacker or combat specialist, or they're a novelty, like a guy who farts uncontrollably or someone who may abruptly drop dead.

Each citizen has a schedule, and relationships. Even enemy guards don't work 24-7. They leave their posts and walk around in civilian clothing, which is both a nice detail and can provide the opportunity to safely dish out some revenge when they're not in heavily restricted areas (like I did with the one who kidnapped my getaway driver).

Now and again you'll run into a person you met earlier, or someone who knows someone you've met: a relative, girlfriend, their doctor. If you've helped their acquaintance, they'll know about it and have a positive opinion of you, making them easier to recruit to the cause. If you've beaten up their friend, they'll know that too and they'll dislike you.

Most missions in *Legion's* open-world are pretty similar:

SKILL SHARE *The strangest people we met in London, and their skills*



MARTIN CHAI

Occupation: None
Claim to fame: Has disease named after him
Weird Skill: Flatulence. Uncontrollable. It alerts enemies.



AMY YI

Occupation: Living statue
Fun fact: Spends 20 percent of her income on paint
Weird Skill: Can hide from pursuers by holding still.



BOB O'KEEFE

Occupation: Novelist
Weird Skill: Will gamble away DedSec's money.
Weirder Skill: Spontaneous death.



BRITTANY BHATTACHARYA

Occupation: Busker
Hobbies: Car Theft
Weird Skill: Can still beatbox while wearing mascot costume.



MANAL AWAD

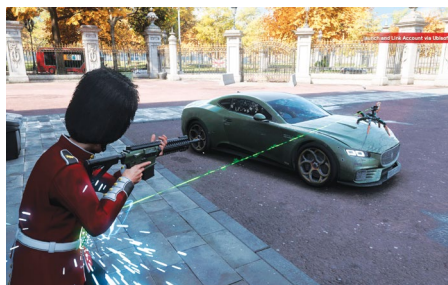
Age: 76
Occupation: Adult film star
Age: Again, she's 76
Weird Skill: She's so famous that she'll be recognised in public.



Protests can be found all over London.



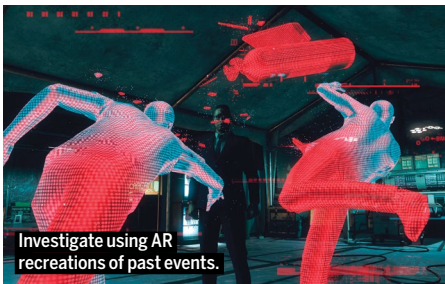
Beekeepers control swarms of cyberbees. Hey, it's the future.



Drones are pesky enemies until you learn to control them.



I hope everyone can tell I'm from London.



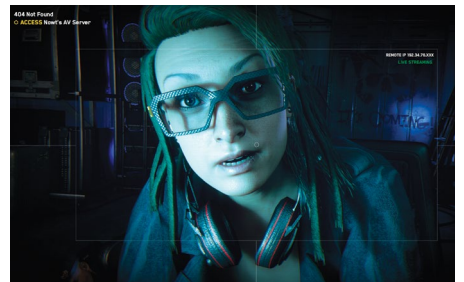
Investigate using AR recreations of past events.



Cargo drones can carry you anywhere.



Cops are dicks, but people will rise up.



Recruit street performers. Because... why the hell not?

» stealthy infiltrations into secure buildings and areas filled with guards, cameras and other security measures. While the configurations of mission areas usually aren't wildly different, it's still satisfying to virtually infiltrate a location, hacking security cameras to spy on the premises, mark the guards, absorb the layouts, and activate traps. Most mission locations can be tackled from different directions and in different ways using gadgets available to all your team members, plus whatever special skills are unique to them. I can send in a semi-creepy spiderbot to crawl through vents or a drone over the roof and into windows to disable security features, then sneak inside, performing stealth takedowns on enemies or slipping past when they're distracted.

HACK AND SLASH

If I don't feel like being all that stealthy, which is often the case, I can take a shortcut by airlifting my agent to the roof with a hijacked cargo drone to get as close as possible to my goal. Or I can just fight my way in with melee combat and guns. As in the earlier *Watch Dogs* games, it feels the best to clear an entire building of threats remotely and make off with stolen data all while standing innocently outside. It's also hectic fun when something goes wrong, the sirens blare, the guards are alerted, and you have to engage in a battle to escape.

Initially, my crew was largely non-lethal types, but it's not long before I start dropping bodies using other characters. I recruit a former MI6 spy to my roster, armed with a silenced pistol and a cool watch gadget that lets him jam enemy weapons. He's a James Bond type who wouldn't give a second thought to headshotting any guards that get in his way. That's just part of the gig. I've got a professional hitman on my squad, too, who I recruited after following him around at night and witnessing him stabbing some unfortunate citizen to death in a park. I even recruited a member of Albion, whose uniform lets me wander around secure buildings without drawing too much attention. She doesn't seem the type to worry too much if someone gets riddled with bullets or dies in an explosion, either.

I hate fighting drones – they're basically giant flying insects

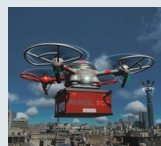
DRONE ZONE *Legion's flying robots and what they can do for you*



CTOS DRONE

Pros: Like smartphones, they're everywhere and easy to find.

Cons: Can only distract enemies, can't attack them.



PARCEL DRONE

Pros: Can drop little boxes on people. Sometimes they explode!

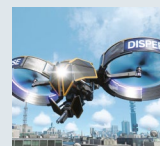
Cons: Someone is impatiently waiting for that package.



NEWS DRONE

Pros: Can take pictures and daze crowds with a camera flash.

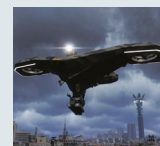
Cons: Like the news industry itself, it's pretty fragile.



RIOT DRONE

Pros: Has a shotgun and can fire gas canisters.

Cons: It's usually firing them at you. Best to hack it as soon as possible.



CT DRONE

Pros: Has a heavy machine-gun and lots of missiles.

Cons: Built by the lowest bidder: constantly overheats.

Killing with those characters feels perfectly in-character, and I can swap to someone else if I want to return to non-lethal tactics.

DRONING ON

Just as it took me a few hours to start appreciating my team, it took me a while to warm up to the sheer number of drones in *Legion*. I hate fighting drones – they're basically giant flying insects, one of my least favourite enemy types. At one point in *Legion* I was piloting a drone while trying to protect a friendly drone from being attacked by swarms

of enemy drones.

Watch Dogs Legion really goes all in on drones, and for a while I couldn't stand it.

But as I unlocked more skills for my team, my anger at drones slowly turned into appreciation

because I could disable them, hijack and pilot them, and even turn their AI against my enemies. Now, overhearing a soldier say he's sending a drone out to look for me is music to my ears. Dude, you're just giving me another weapon to destroy you with, thanks though! If the bad guys don't send drones after me I'll hijack any random ones flying around the area instead. I am a drone convert.

I even have a drone expert on my team, a guy named Fallon. He can summon his own drone, which can be remotely piloted to deliver electric shocks that KO most enemies with one blast. He can also chuck a second drone into the air that will divebomb and incapacitate a targeted enemy. Plus, my unlocked team skills let him

disable one enemy drone, commandeer a second one and tell a third to fight for him on autopilot. That's five different drones Fallon has access to within a few seconds in a single fight. Drones went from being a nuisance to the centrepiece of my infiltration and combat strategy, and Fallon became the star of my team. He's basically my protagonist now.

I never really got into *Legion's* story, which is almost entirely related to you by Bagley, DedSec's fast-talking, deeply sarcastic AI who briefs you before missions, during missions, after missions – he's not as bad as some chattering robots I could name, but he never really shuts the hell up. Since you're playing as any one of your team members rather than a main character, there's little in the way of meaningful interaction with Bagley – pretty much everything he suggests is A-OK with whichever character you're inhabiting at the time. There's a single choice to be made during the main campaign, otherwise, you're just following a to-do list, completing objectives and being agreeable.

Legion's play-as-anyone gamble just about pays off. Most of London's citizens are way too ordinary to be much fun, but the few I grew to care about wound up feeling more important to me than most videogame protagonists ever do. Not bad for a group of randomly generated misfits. ■



PC GAMER

VERDICT

Playing as anyone works great in *Watch Dogs Legion*, when you've finally found the right group of anyone.

80

PICK AND MIX

Chasing after the ultimate high is what makes **FUSER** electrifying. *By Rachel Watts*

I'm grooving nicely to my current *Fuser* mix. I've got Carly Rae Jepsen's upbeat drums from Call Me Maybe blended with the deep synths of LMFAO's Party Rock Anthem and the cool guitar riffs from Don't Let me Down by The Chainsmokers. It's going pretty well, and the crowd is diggin' it, but I've got one space left for vocals. I have one song in mind, but I'm hesitating. Do I dare use the vocals from Smash Mouth's All-Star?

The mischievous streak in me *needs* to know what it would sound like, and before I think of the devastating consequences of a hundred people shouting "Hey now!", I've already clicked on it. The disc drops, and to my astonishment, it's not terrible!

Fuser's music mixing does a great job of inviting you to mix to your heart's content. It's essentially a DJ simulation where you mash up music on the go, taking samples from different songs and playing them together. You can choose which elements of a song you want to mix and assign it to one of the four turntables, praying that it sounds great when the disc begins to spin.

With the 100-song playlist, it may seem almost impossible to try to find a musical match, but *Fuser* cleverly blends each of your chosen samples together – it's quite incredible. No matter how different your chosen song's genre, tempo and musical key might be, *Fuser* morphs each song effortlessly to match the other. Not every mix is going to be a masterpiece, and sometimes it sounds like your discs are making their way through a shredder but when it works it's harmonic euphoria.

There's nothing quite like stumbling upon this sweet spot and it's this feeling that is at the heart of *Fuser's* campaign. Playing as an undiscovered DJ, you need to prove your mixing skills to a string of eccentric music producers by headlining gigs at a string of different venues. How well a concert goes depends on how many points you can score from completing timed

mini-goals throughout your set. Tasks can be anywhere from fading out a disc, switching between keys, or creating a loop and all while keeping in time with the rhythm of the music. Audience members will also shout

requests at you during a set, and completing them earns you more points towards your overall performance.

Most of the time I found rising to these tasks enjoyable, like including Rick Astley into my Latin-Pop

fusion. But sometimes *Fuser* can lob tasks at you that put a real damper on your flow. When an audience member shouts that they specifically

Fuser encourages you to create music with more depth

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A flexible DJ simulator

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Harmonix

PUBLISHER
NCSOFT

REVIEWED ON
i5-2500K, 8GB RAM,
GTX 670

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
fuser.com

want the vocals from Coldplay's Clocks for the purpose of letting me score more points, I gasp in offence and duck the request. A bit counterintuitive, but I'm making magic here.

DECKS-TERITY

It may sound like *Fuser's* campaign is all solely about point-scoring, but the campaign does much more than that. It's tempting to fire on all four cylinders, switching discs as quickly as possible to get cheap cheers from the crowd. But *Fuser* encourages you to create music with more depth. Bringing a crowd down with a humble drum loop is just as important as launching them into the sky with an exhilarating bass drop. It's all about creating anticipation and then landing the ultimate pay-off so when that high hits.

If *Fuser's* campaign mode is blood-pumping EDM at 150 BPM, then the game's free play mode is a calmer rhythm of laid back R&B. It's an endless mode, free from point-scoring or crowd demands where you can experiment as much as you like. Free play gives you the space to create interesting mixes in your own time, and you can revisit the mixes you quickly saved in the rush of campaign mode.

Although it's tempting to stay in the comfort of freestyle where the crowds magically enjoy everything you play, the campaign mode is where you'll find the game's exhilarating highs. When you're in the throes of mixing and you create an absolute banger (on purpose or by accident) it's electrifying, and after you've done it once you want to feel it again and again. *Fuser* is a rhythm game where you never stop chasing those incredible highs. ■

INTRODUCING DJ GIGAWATTS

Here are some tips on how to create your perfect DJ persona

1 An animal mask to hide your tears when you land the perfect four-disc drop.

2 Confidence so powerful that people won't care when you sneak some country into your hardcore EDM mix.

3 Random leg straps and spiked shoulder pads to externalise your inner edge.

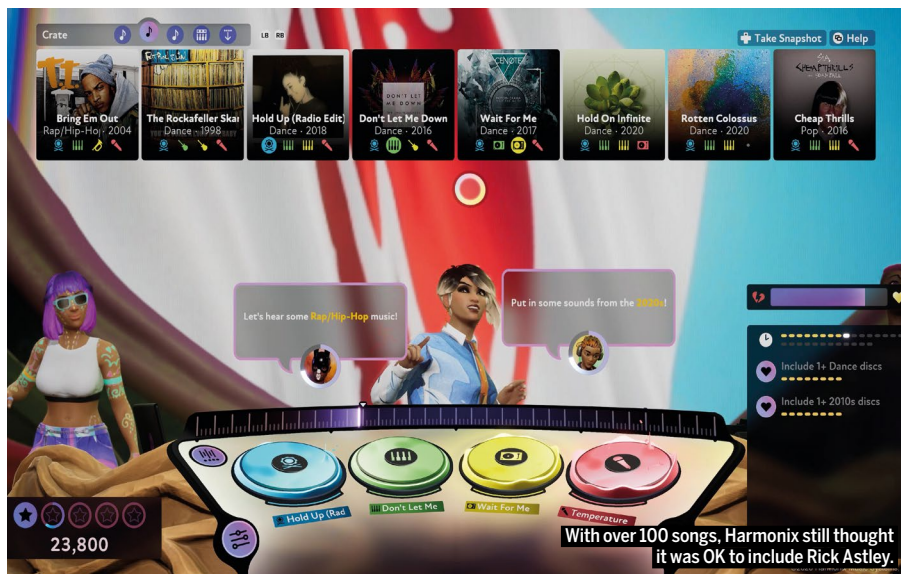
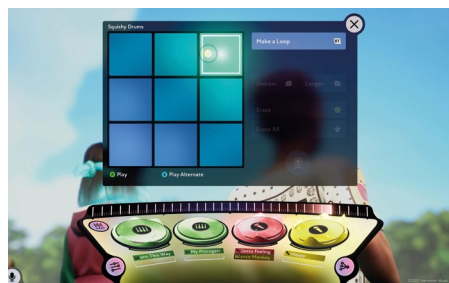
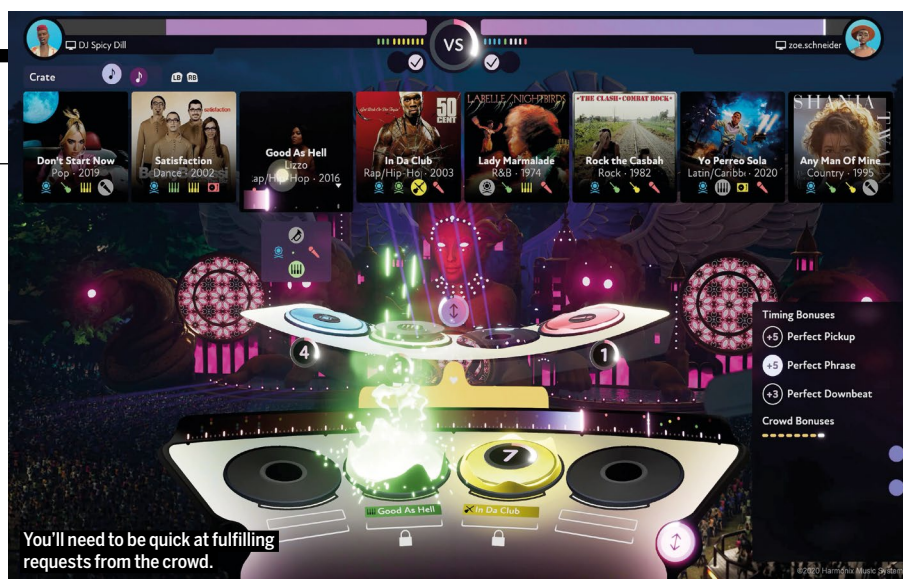
4 Steel toe-capped boots for jumping around on stage and stomping on all of the haters.



PC GAMER VERDICT

Fuser lets players take control of the music more than ever before. And you might even sound quite good.

77



VICIOUS CYCLE

Hell boils over in **DOOM ETERNAL:**
THE ANCIENT GODS – PART ONE. By Jeremy Peel

If the Doom Slayer is a race car, as id Software has described him, then *The Ancient Gods – Part One* is a series of victory laps around three new courses. It picks up right at the finish line of *Doom Eternal*, and the experience is akin to waking up at the wheel of a Ferrari screaming down the track at 200mph. While it's possible to play without having completed its parent game, you'd be foolish to try.

You inherit the Slayer plus all the extras, souped up with weapon mods and ability runes picked up during *Eternal*'s original campaign. And despite having completed it, I spent the first 20 minutes embarrassing myself, thumping at a reload key that doesn't exist. It's the shooter equivalent of flicking into sports mode and realising you've activated the wipers instead.

id Software, like the Slayer, is at the height of its powers. *Doom 2016* saw the studio reinvent the wheel – quite literally, building the game around spinning arenas that set you in constant motion. Ever since, it's been coming up with inventive ways to thrust a stick in the spokes, tripping up players by disrupting the formula.

Doom Eternal's most notorious example was the Marauder, a relentless runner who pursued the Slayer like a shadow, if your shadow owned an axe and a bright-orange attack dog. He returns in *The Ancient Gods*, and exemplifies id's trend

towards enemies who can only be defeated in highly specific fashion. Take the Turrets, new fixed placement shooters that appear like miniature Eyes of Sauron. A couple of shots through the scope of your assault rifle will burst the orb – but take too long during targeting and the ball will retreat inside its pillar, surviving until you can loop around for another try.

The truth is that *The Ancient Gods* regularly frightened me

HOST WANTED

Then there's the Spirit, which makes a

ghostbuster of the Slayer. Mostly invisible, you'll know it by the blue aura that encircles its host – as well as the super-speed, hyper-aggressive assaults on your person. Once the host is killed, the possessing Spirit bursts out, and you have a few seconds to zap it with the plasma rifle's microwave beam. If you're tardy or get distracted, then the Spirit will hop into another host and you'll have to begin again.

You would think this kind of step-by-step enemy disposal would

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The first half of *Doom Eternal*'s master-level DLC campaign

EXPECT TO PAY

£16

DEVELOPER

id Software

PUBLISHER

Bethesda

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, Intel Core i5-6500, 8GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

bethesda.net/en/game/doom

trap you into a process – as if shooting by instruction manual. But the Spirit presents more tactical choice, not less: do you focus your firepower on the host, and hope you can follow through with the plasma? Or demolish the most powerful demons on the periphery first, ensuring there are no large homes left for the ghost to haunt?

The biggest worry going into *The Ancient Gods* was that *Doom*'s momentum might be stalled by the absence of Mick Gordon, its composer since 2016, whose hell choirs and industrial crunch have become central to the series. It's a fitting compliment to Gordon's work that he's been replaced by not one man, but two – and while there's nothing as striking as BFG Division soundtracking the *Ancient Gods*, Andrew Hulshult and David Levy do an admirable job.

This is *Doom* at its most oppressive and intimidating. There's a little respite outside combat, and you certainly won't find any in the centrepiece battles. There were moments, after several minutes in the mosh pit, where the appearance of a charging Marauder, or two towering Tyrants or three Barons of Hell left me buckling emotionally, not knowing how I'd keep up the act that I was the Slayer, the only thing the demons fear. The truth is that *The Ancient Gods* regularly frightened me with its intensity.

The Ancient Gods – Part One is a virtuosic display, then – and demands that you rise to its level. After finishing the campaign missions on Ultra-Violence, I was so exhausted I couldn't quite tell whether I'd actually enjoyed myself – synapses fried by the sheer mental and physical challenge. ■

INFERNAL INTERN

The best quotes from the UAC's fearless tea boy

"I mean, we're about to save the world. Like I said, I'm in."

"I, er, see that your mission objective states that you're going to destroy the sphere, not retrieve it?"

"Ready for launch, Doomguy! I'm sorry."



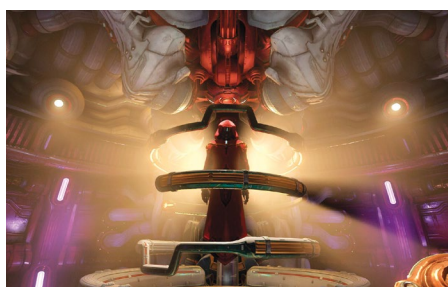
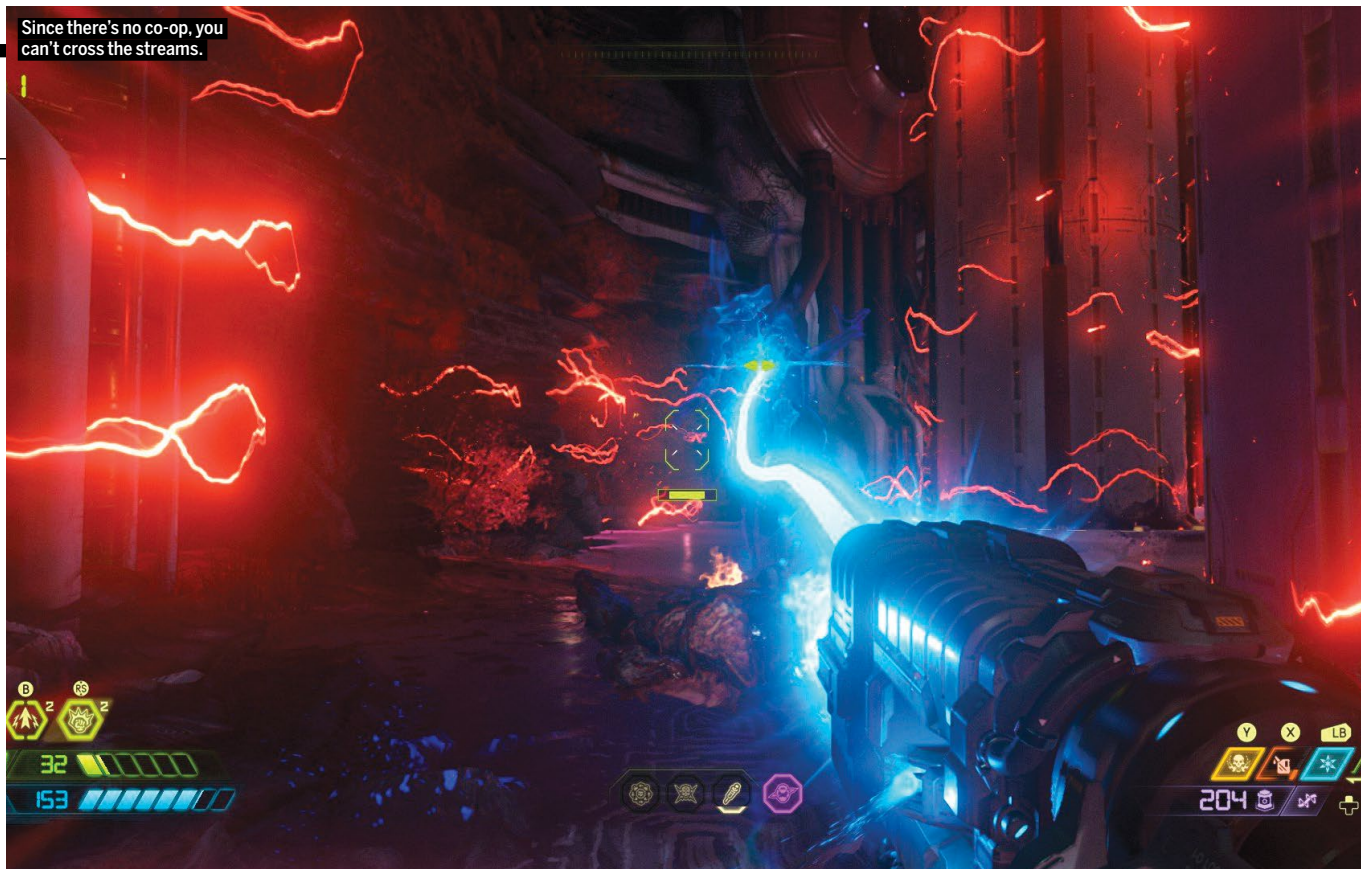
PC GAMER

VERDICT

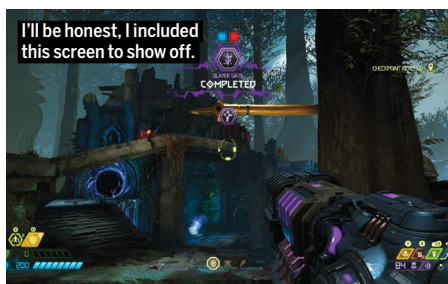
Doom Eternal: The Ancient Gods – Part One is a frankly terrifying exercise in pushing *Doom* as far as it can go.

89

Since there's no co-op, you can't cross the streams.



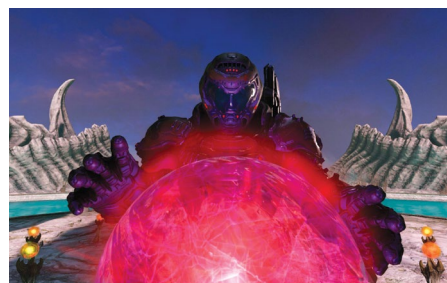
I'll be honest, I included this screen to show off.



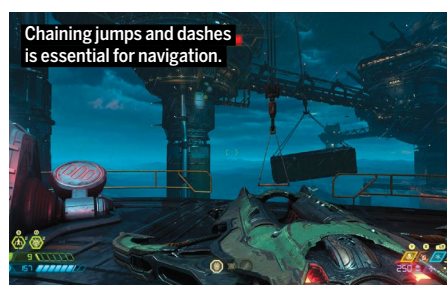
You might scare the internet, mate, but not me.



You don't want to be in a facility the Slayer visits.



Chaining jumps and dashes is essential for navigation.



FEEL LUCKY, CYBERPUNK?

A world of pain – usually yours – in
GHOSTRUNNER. By Luke Kemp

The fundamental concept is easy to understand, and mildly terrifying. Each enemy dies in one hit, and so do you. You'll sometimes die (many) more times in one level here than in an entire game elsewhere. It's hard – brutally, unforgivingly so – but fair in a way that some obnoxiously difficult games don't even try to be. I've brought a knife to a gun fight, and I love it.

If you're moving, you're running. To stay still is ordinarily to invite death; most enemies have guns, they're all excellent shots, and you only have a sword. There's no time for quiet contemplation while you're in the air or running along walls either. Miss a jump or react too

slowly to fling yourself at the next wall, and you'll fall ungracefully to your death. You're constantly on the move, like a stray dog with excellent parkour skills and nothing left to lose.

Despite the fact that you'll often have somebody chatting in your ear, there's no strong narrative to hold everything together. Something about betrayal, something about a vicious ruler, something about human experimentation... it's, y'know, *fine*. A Saturday morning cartoon co-directed by Ridley Scott and Quentin Tarantino.

Honestly though, that doesn't matter. At its best, *Ghostrunner* is *fantastic*. Bouncing between walls to jump down to the floor, cutting through two enemies in a row, grappling up to the wall so that you can run along it to leap down once

more, sliding under a huge laser blast to destroy the mech that sent it your way, is a unique thrill.

Nonetheless, *Ghostrunner* occasionally seems determined to stab itself in the foot. There are multiple instances of travel through the 'Cybervoid', a blocky electronic space between areas. Sometimes, this serves as a tutorial area for new abilities. More often, it's used to force the player into tedious puzzles which may or may not involve

slow-paced platforming. There's absolutely no reason for these (rare) sequences to exist, and they completely kill the pace and atmosphere.

GHOST OF A CHANCE

Back in the 'real' world, things have been designed very well to avoid some foreseeable pitfalls. The gradual introduction of new enemies and environmental elements prevents monotony setting in without overwhelming you. Crucially, checkpoints have been set out in such a way as to make things reasonable

You're constantly on the move, like a stray dog with parkour skills

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A cyberpunk parkour slasher that thinks *Dark Souls* gives players too many hit points

EXPECT TO PAY

£25

DEVELOPER

One More Level, Slipgate6, 3D Realms

PUBLISHER

505 Games, All In! Games

REVIEWED ON

GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

ghostrunnergame.com

without reducing the challenge.

Levels are split into chunks, enemy encounters and tricky platforming sequences divided by checkpoints. Each fight is essentially a blood-spattered parkour puzzle. I worried that this might be a game where you could only progress by following a strictly determined path, but each arena usually offers at least two routes to start down, and the sequence you kill enemies in is entirely up to you. I prefer to destroy shield generators first so everybody's vulnerable at once, take down any walking mechs with their huge laser blasts next, then pick off everybody else according to threat.

Near the end of the game, that most unoriginal and annoying enemy type is introduced: The Thing That Explodes When It Gets Too Close. Dying because you run into one around a corner, or get hit by one that you didn't know was right behind you, is no fun. Thank goodness they only make a brief appearance.

There are a total of four abilities unlocked during the course of the game. Three kill enemies from a distance, while the fourth temporarily turns an enemy into an ally. The upgrade system links to these in an interesting way. The more upgrades you have equipped (easier to deflect bullets with your sword, mark collectibles on your radar, etc), the slower the focus bar necessary to use these abilities passively charges. Like moment-to-moment play, it's about risk and reward.

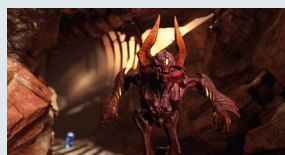
It's flawed, then, but never critically so. *Ghostrunner* wants to make you feel like a cybernetically enhanced badass – and it achieves this almost all the time with great style. A game that's tough *and* fair *and* fun? Who'da thunk it. ■

BAD INFLUENCE The games that haunt Ghostrunner



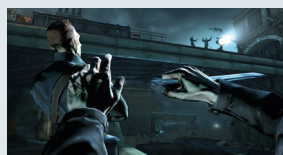
MIRROR'S EDGE

The game that demonstrated first-person parkour could work, and even be fun.



DOOM

The modern *Doom* games, like *Ghostrunner*, are all about constant movement (and gore).



DISHONORED

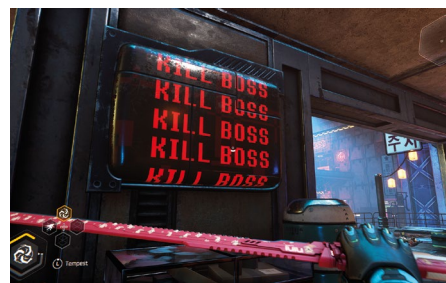
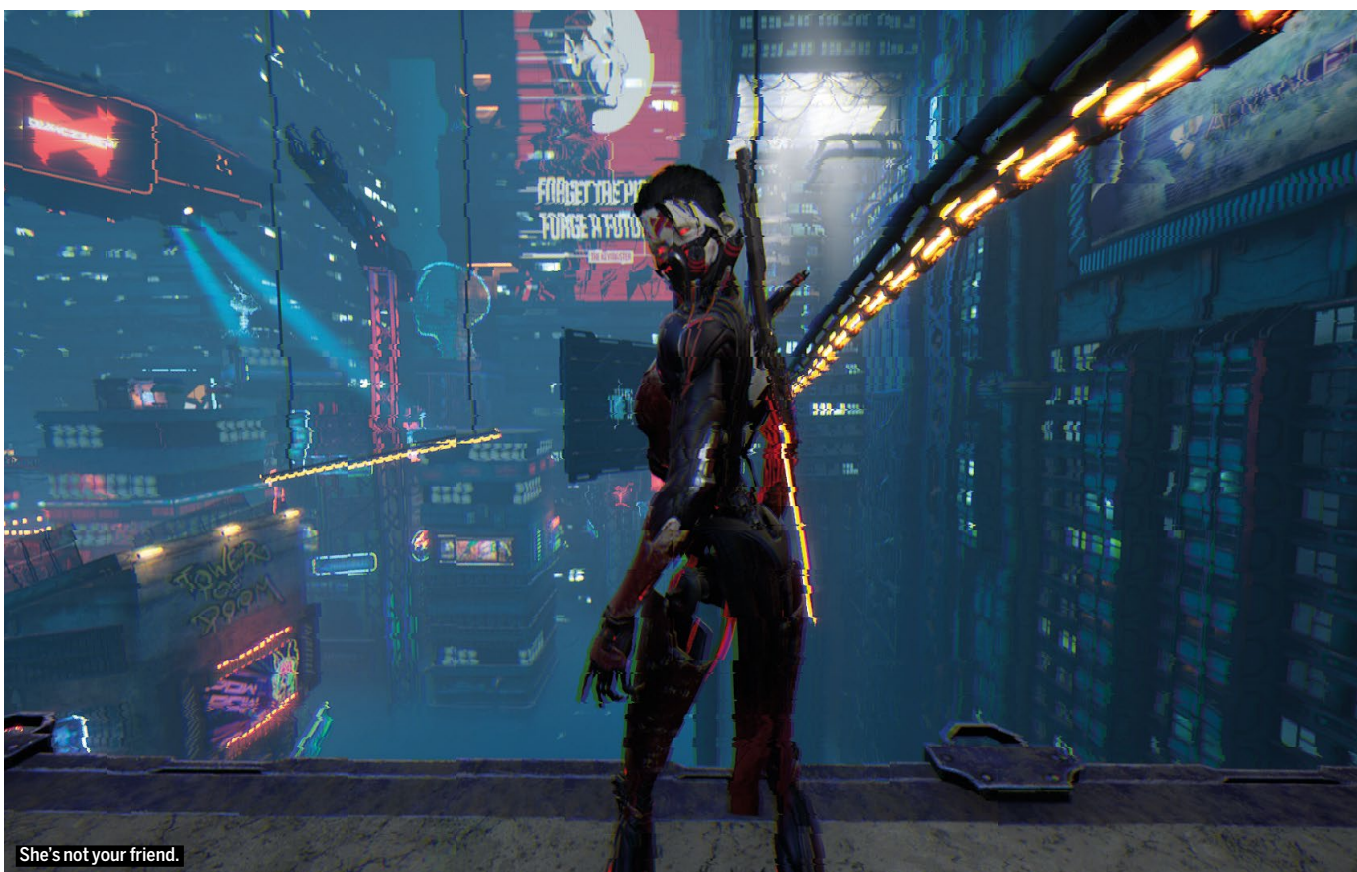
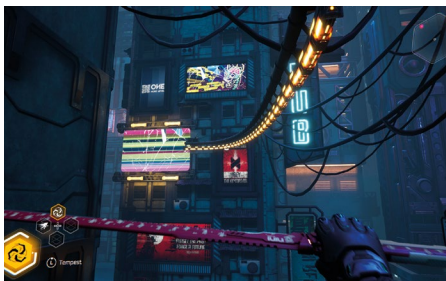
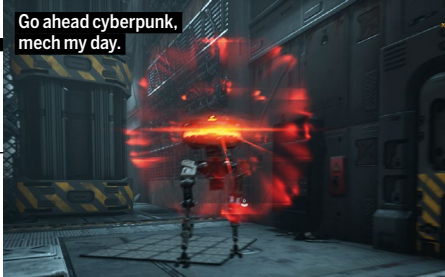
You can close distance quickly in both games, and they even both have an ability named Blink.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Incredibly tough but perfectly fair, *Ghostrunner* cuts the cybernetically enhanced mustard.

81



GHOST TOWN

I AM DEAD is a playful exploration of life in limbo. *By Rachel Watts*

I love the laid-back vibes of hidden-object games. I like the feeling of easing into a scene and taking my sweet time searching for a long list of items. *I Am Dead* is a hidden-object game that keeps the puzzle elements of the genre, but is about finding out what small curiosities mean to people as much as spotting objects. It's a game about death, but also how we remember people after they are gone through the things they leave behind.

That's a pretty ominous introduction to *I Am Dead*, but it's more upbeat than it sounds. Sure, there is talk of ghosts, the afterlife and morality, but it handles these topics with heart and a sprinkle of silliness. It's nowhere near as dark as the name implies.

You play as Morris Lupton, an ex-museum curator who has unfortunately died and now finds himself as a ghost haunting his home, the quaint volcanic isle of

Shelmerston. The afterlife isn't quite as peaceful as Morris thought, the island's ancient guardian has decided to retire, meaning that the volcano will erupt unless another guardian is appointed. It's up to Morris and his ghost dog, Sparky, to find a replacement and save the lovely seaside town from total destruction.

The best candidates for the position are Shelmerston's deceased residents, but the only way to ask if they are up for the role is to first conjure up their spirit. With Morris' ghost abilities, you need to delve into

the memories of the living who knew the deceased, locate the objects the ghost cherished when they were alive, and then summon them from their eternal slumber. It sounds like a lot, but *I Am Dead* makes it as

streamlined as possible, with some free-roaming along the way.

The game divides the island into five chapters, each exploring an area that's home to one of Shelmerston's ghosts. These scenes are

bursting with character, like a park that's been turned into an outside art exhibit, or a lighthouse that doubles as a yoga retreat. Alongside memory delving, Morris can also peer inside objects with a strange 'slicing' ability, similar to X-ray vision. Couple this with his ability to float, and you can satisfyingly swoop around each area, peering into buildings and clicking on objects for further inspection.

When you click on an item, it will pop out of the scene and turn into a tactile vignette you can pivot and zoom in on and inspect from every

Morris can also peer inside objects with a strange 'slicing' ability

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A hidden-object puzzle game about exploring the afterlife

EXPECT TO PAY

£16

DEVELOPER

Hollow Ponds and Richard Hogg

PUBLISHER

Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON

i5-2500K, 8GB RAM, GTX 670

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

iamdeadgame.com

angle. Zoom in on a computer and you can see all its circuits inside, or inspect a grass lump and find a burrow full of rabbits. These little wonders are a joy to find, and there are hundreds of items to inspect. Scanning each and every one is worth it for the jokes and surprises that have been hidden away, and *I Am Dead's* quaint world never makes you feel like you have overstayed your welcome.

TREASURE TROVE

I Am Dead is essentially one long treasure hunt, but each object is more than just an item on a checklist. After finding out that an ex-Shelmerston resident, Ogden Beckett, would be a potential candidate to be the island's protector, I find that a chap named Henry has a fond memory of him that I can rummage through.

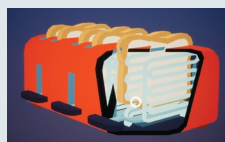
Learning that Ogden was an avid multi-instrumentalist, specialising in the sousaphone, I set on finding his trusty bronze mouthpiece. With some light deduction work each item is easy enough to find, but what make these objects more meaningful are the memories attached to them.

Henry remembered Ogden because of how wonderfully he played in Shelmerston's brass band, and the mouthpiece reminds him of those good times. Each object in *I Am Dead* comes with its own happy, sad, or bittersweet tale that really fleshes out the person you're summoning back from the dead.

These items represent how we remember those who have passed on with all we have left of them: objects and our memories. There's no mention about how any of the ghosts died, the focus is on who they were when they were alive, and *I Am Dead* is very touching in that respect. ■

SLICE OF LIFE

Here are some of the cool objects you can open in *I Am Dead*



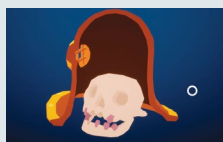
TOASTER

I wish I had a toaster that could fit six slices of bread, I'd be unstoppable.



OVEN

Zooming in on this oven reveals a pie baking inside. It's a vegetable one at that.



DIVING HELMET

I really hope that skull doesn't belong to this diving helmet's previous owner.

PC GAMER

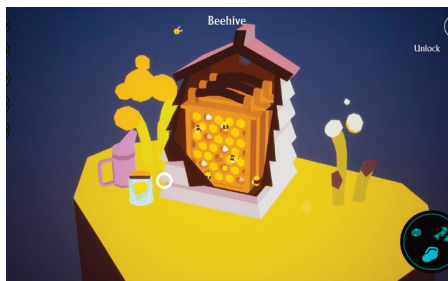
VERDICT

With leisurely puzzles and gentle humour, *I Am Dead* explores death in a light-hearted way. And I'm grateful for it.

75



Morris' ghost dog Sparky will help you sniff out ghosts.



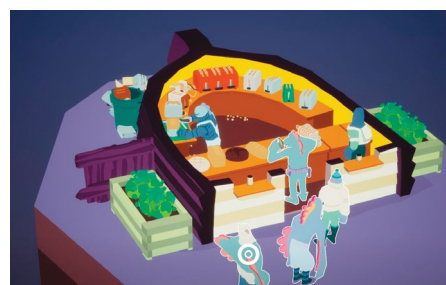
Even in the afterlife, Peter Noach still rocked a pair of crocs.



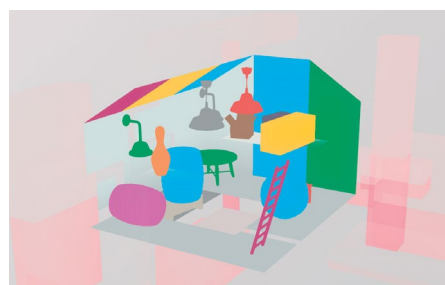
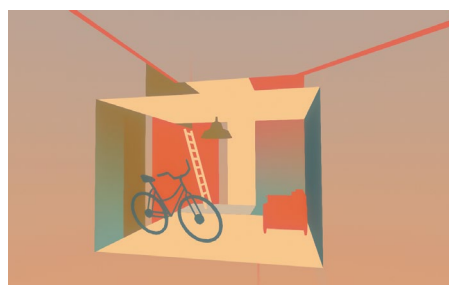
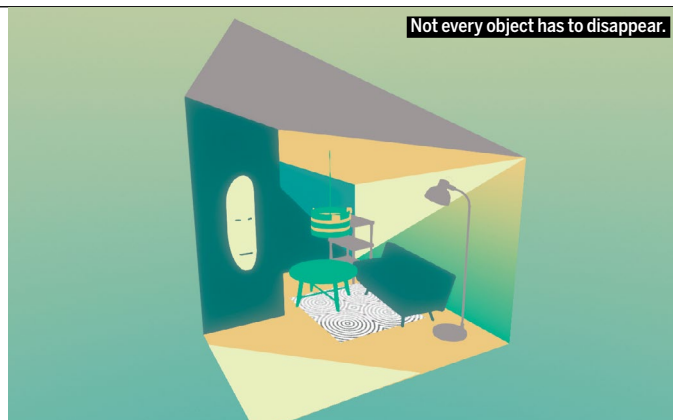
The artists of Shelperston have an unusual eye for art.



This robot has quite the green thumb.



The Shelperston quay is chock-a-block with objects and buildings to inspect.



NOW YOU SEE IT

How to disappear completely in minimalist puzzle game **EMPTY**

Stuff. It's great, isn't it? Except when it's not: when you attach personal baggage to it, and you have so much that you can barely move in your own house. *Empty* is a game about *stuff*, more specifically getting rid of it, as you Marie Kondo your way around a sequence of rooms, ridding the colourful 3D spaces of all their clutter. Once it's gone, and each room is basically just the walls, floor and ceiling, you move on. There are other domestic spaces, and later on more abstract scenes, that demand your attention.

But *Empty* is a puzzle game. Rather than dragging the unwanted items into a skip, you have to vanish them instead, by lining each up against a surface of the same colour. Turn the scene so that the orange lamp is facing the orange wall, and the lamp will disappear, while the wall will turn white so that it can't be used again. Oh *fantastic*, you think, the lamp's no longer blocking the green desk, so let's rotate the room until that lines up with the green ceiling. You see how it goes: you vanish each item in turn until all the marked items are absent, and the room looks like it's never been lived in.

Later levels introduce objects that will paint surfaces colours other than white, so they *can* be used again, but this adds only a little more

complexity to a puzzle game that seems to have held back a little. I was expecting another system to come along that would fully open up the concept, so it felt a bit unsatisfying to find that, oh, I had suddenly completed the game. The puzzles are linear, and never scale greatly in difficulty, no matter how many objects the developers can cram into each scene. But I managed to get through them all annoyingly quickly.

It felt a bit unsatisfying to find that, oh, I had completed the game

PUZZLE TIME

If I'm griping, it's because the act of playing this is a little magical, and, frankly, I wanted more of it. If only real-world clutter could be tucked away so easily. Each tactile scene is part dolls' house and part Rubik's Cube, as you rotate the world with the mouse until you can line it up just

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A soothing puzzle game about making stuff disappear

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Dustyroom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz,
6GB RAM, GeForce
GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/EmptyGame

right, and *voilà*. There's usually one tough-ish puzzle in each stage that unlocks the rest, as something of an avalanche. Ah, so the table was blocking the football was blocking the car was blocking the lampshade – and now it's empty.

It was only when I had cleared a few rooms that something like *regret* came over me. Is this really a better space now than when it was lived in? Who owned that bike, and what was the story behind that telescope? Oh God, I've turned a home into a clinical Ikea showroom, just a shame there's no meatballs.

GAME OVER

Perhaps the interstitial story blobs could have wrestled with that, or with, well, *anything*. Instead, the text-based musings are a little too random to cohere. They hardly get in the way of the puzzling, however, which is satisfying and relaxing, and without being a massive hassle like a real clear-out would be. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

More could have been done with the idea, but *Empty* is still a lovely puzzler that hits medium heights.

77

COLLISION COURSE

How (not) to run a tram line in **SPÅRVAGN**

I feel that *Spårvagn* is a game that knows it's frustrating. Why else would this game of metropolitan tram traffic control feature such a soothing ambient soundtrack? Without it, I might have thrown a trummy tantrum and thrown in the towel before finishing it, but that minimalist soundtrack – and its beautifully alive top-down city – combined to offset the frustration, just long enough for me to complete its handful of stages.

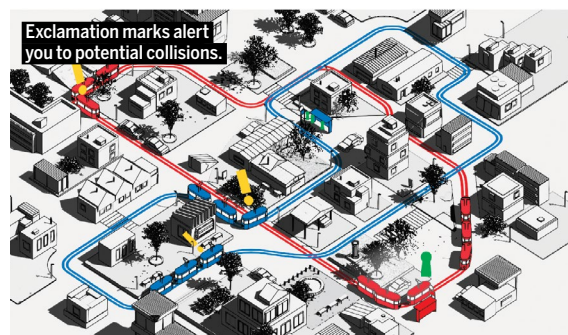
In each cityscape, you have to manage a couple of tram lines long enough for all the waiting passengers to be collected. The trams move automatically, but you can pause them momentarily by clicking on them – and if you don't, a collision will occur sooner or later. However, leave them paused *too* long and they might be bashed from behind by

another tram running on the same line. And that makes all sorts of mess.

There are red tracks, featuring red trams, and blue tracks featuring blue ones, with the different colours operating at different speeds. Multiple trams soon appear on each criss-crossing track, but you can only halt one of each colour at a time, giving you another thing to have to worry about – it's a little hectic.

This is a game of chain reactions, as all your tactical pauses – even the briefest ones – come back to haunt you. Make just one tiny catastrophic collision and you'll have to replay the entire stage, which is awfully frustrating. But how can you stay mad at such a lively digital train set? The rub – aside from the frustration – is that *Spårvagn* feels way too short. After just a few exciting levels, it's all over, and that's a shame because I was enjoying it. ■

72



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Dustyroom

LINK
bit.ly/3JTgDPF

PANE SAILING

Be a nosy neighbour in **BEYOND YOUR WINDOW**

This asks you to imagine the world on the *other* side of that pane of glass. What's going on in the lives of your neighbours? By clicking on four apartment windows, in any order you desire, you'll witness glimpses of their lives, as they struggle with relationships and work-life balance.

There's the middle-aged couple who snap at each other over a seemingly inconsequential matter, a man and a woman coping with breakups, and the lead of an indie studio wrestling with coding errors and a fast approaching deadline.

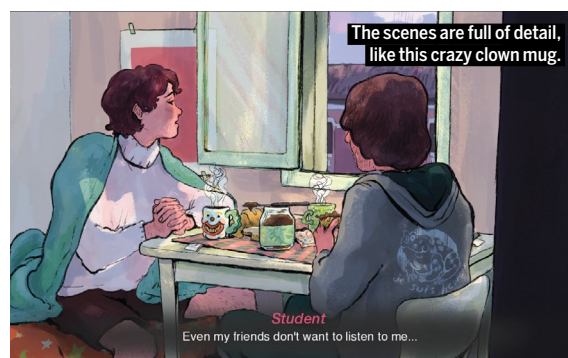
You'll drop in on each twice before witnessing the resolution, which takes the form of direct interviews with the cast and seemingly a few of the (real) developers of *Beyond Your Window*.

It's an unusual ending, and I enjoyed how it leant against the

fourth wall, coolly smoking a cigarette, but it didn't seem to change based on the few decisions I had made throughout the stories. You'll influence some quite a lot – by getting a woman back with her ex, for example – and others only a little, but you never get any satisfying closure on any of them, perhaps appropriately for a game where you're only catching fleeting glimpses of other peoples' lives.

Overall, I really enjoyed the glimpses. The comic book-style art is gritty and beautiful, and there's a great sense of atmosphere, as you view the outside of the building before diving in to see what's going on inside. But there isn't enough of it to cohere into a satisfying story, let alone four: not enough interesting dialogue, or choices to make. It's a sketch of a game, though it is a striking one. ■

62



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Team SolEtude

LINK
bit.ly/35XL5hL



CHRISTMAS KNIGHT

Separating the naughty from the nice in **BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS**

There's a sense of trepidation firing up *Arkham Origins* for the first time. It has a reputation. This is the estranged, drunk uncle of the series – one who starts celebrating Christmas in September and might not actually be a blood relative. His timing is terrible. He's slightly unreliable. But he's not the urine-soaked catastrophe you expect and, in fact, some people like him more than the other uncle with the flashy car.

That's a potentially-too-personal way of saying *Origins* isn't as bad as you probably think, even if it never lives up to the promise of an enriching prequel. In practice, the showcase of Bats as a rawer, more savage version of his later Rocksteady incarnations feels hollow. The Batman of *Arkham Knight* wasn't exactly gentle. There are only so many ways you can explode a knee or rupture an eardrum, and few of them say 'I'm better at dealing with things now'. It's a missed opportunity. The title refers to the origin of the broader Arkham mythology, rather than of Batman himself, but it would have been great to see a more fragile side of Bruce Wayne. Instead, *Origins* makes you appear disproportionately capable as you glide through Gotham as a fully equipped, upgraded Dark Knight, and

that takes much of the threat out of the 'kill Batman' subplot. Instead of the parade of supervillain assassins being the thing that moulds Bruce Wayne into a gushing justice spigot, they're snails crossing a busy road. They're going to get crushed eventually.

Other things about *Origins* feel off. There's a vague lack of finesse that a game designer could pinpoint and articulate far better than me. The timing of the fights is sluggish,

like controls in a rhythm action game that need recalibrating. And the camera is more unruly than in other games in the series.

Technically speaking, it's more stable than it was at launch – I had one slightly catastrophic crash, but generally it runs well and looks gorgeous, even if it can't compare to the rain-drenched lustre of *Arkham*

The title refers to the origin of the broader Arkham mythology

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Festive Batprequel made by WB Montreal, not Rocksteady

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
WB Games Montreal, Splash Damage

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/34X9kNM

Knight. These slightly worn edges don't sound like much, but they diminish an experience we're used to being immaculate.

Despite this, I do like *Origins*. And in fact, the contrarian in me might like it more than *Knight*. There's a lack of urgency to the story which, instead of making things flat, gives me space to pretend to be Batman. I can go back to the Batcave and bicker with Alfred and it doesn't feel like I'm putting innocent lives at risk when I spend an hour getting distracted by petty crimes. The villains are enjoyable, too. This has the best version of Bane in the series, and actually getting to fistfight Deathstroke is a valuable narrative moment in Batman's history. And the period and setting are fantastic, even if Gotham looks a bit drab and industrial in places. The snow and tinny Christmas songs make Gotham feel like a real place, with Bats acting like a Kevlar-coated Santa delivering fists of coal to naughty boys. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A fussier, frayed prequel that sporadically delivers on its premise. The experience of being Batman is still sublime.

74

BUG SMACKS

How **HOLLOW KNIGHT** puts the 'warm' in 'swarm'

The theme this month was meant to be festive. And with that in mind, *Hollow Knight* is a stretch but it's a winter-adjacent excuse to play one of the best Metroidvania games ever made. Another is that it's simply brilliant. There's a crispness to it all that satisfies like stepping on a semi-frozen puddle – a clear, sharp sense of purpose that's unusually compelling, even if it can be a harsh experience at times. The setting of Hallownest is uniquely appealing despite having the same wistful sense of decay that British seaside resorts have in October. It's a place long past its prime, full of echoes of former glory. But it doesn't have the same oppressive gloom as its thematic gaming counterparts, such as the likes of Lordran. Despite it being a tired, dangerous place, the flashes of humour and humanity make it endearing. There are squealing grubs

who are wonderful to rescue and bored merchants who crave adventure. Even the insects you batter to death are oddly sweet. And once it's got you, it's near-impossible to escape from *Hollow Knight*'s mesmerising charms – like some rare breed of benevolent spider that catches you in its web just to pay you compliments and give a back rub. The way *Hollow Knight* pushes you further into its world, whether through power-ups or crumbling floors, is so compelling that 35 hours here will seem like a nice afternoon spent examining insects. And that's the low end of the scale: glance at the Steam reviews and you'll see them from people with 100+ hours in the game, all complaining that ten quid for this much game feels like burglary. That's maybe a measure of how good this is – a game you'll want to pay more for. ■

91



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Team Cherry

PUBLISHER
In-house



FAHRENHEIT

There are loads of things that stick in the memory after your first time playing David Cage's *Fahrenheit*. QTE boinking. The heartfelt probably-necrophilia. Floating kung-fu fights against psyche-insects. And that means it's easy to forget how good the setting and opening are. There's a palpable sense of panic to the opening crime scene that I don't think I've seen recreated as effectively in any other game. And while the story stays small, before the SWAT teams and spirit mediums arrive, it's surprisingly effective – more so thanks to some restrained characterisation and seasoned voice acting. It's also maybe the most January game that's ever been made. ■

76



FROSTPUNK

Playing *Frostpunk* sometimes is like reading a historical account of some fatuous, ineffectual king who failed upward into a position of power. "Idealistic but impractical, he invested heavily in schools. But the children stopped being able to write when their fingers fell off due to frostbite." Compared to the constant, escalating crises of *Frostpunk*, every other city management game feels like *Farmville*. And as well as being a brilliant exercise in humility, it's also a useful way of learning to say no to people. Or 'yes', if the question is 'should we keep working even if it kills us'. It sounds grim, but *Frostpunk* is so good that you'll suffer this and more just for a scintilla of success. ■

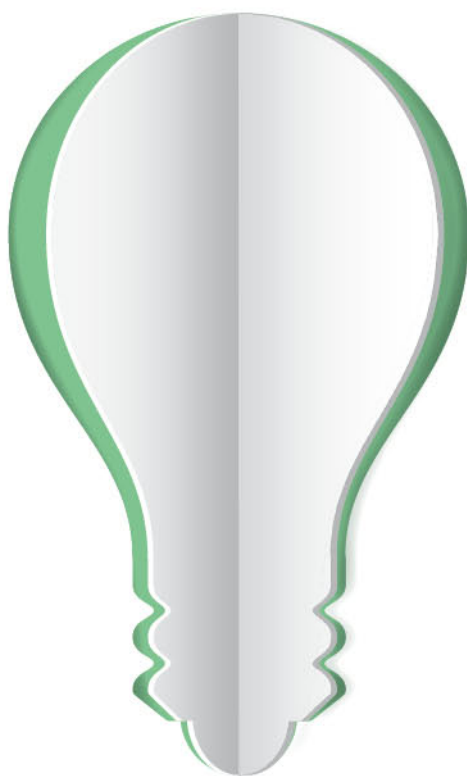
88



THE LONG DARK

I'm not saying that my current playthrough of *The Long Dark* is going badly. Just that I might struggle to survive if I don't manage to kill this rabbit by chucking stones at its adorable head. And I just ran out of stones. It's one of those games that remind you just how dead you'd be if you had to spend even one night outside in mild temperatures, let alone an endless winter in the wake of a geothermal disaster. It's a brutal, unusually brilliant survival game, but it's utterly terrible for your self esteem. ■

81



PAPER POWER

60% of the energy used to produce paper and paper packaging in Europe comes from renewable sources.

Discover the story of paper

www.lovepaper.org

Source: Confederation of European Paper Industries (CEPI), 2018
CEPI represents 92% of European pulp and paper production



HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



96

GROUP TEST

Give your machine a new lease of life with the perfect SSD.



100

TECH REPORT

The technology that could connect our minds to computers.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Putting a new machine together? Check out our recommended builds.

GROUP TEST

PCIe 4.0 SSDs

Next-gen storage is key to the future of gaming, and here are your best options right now. *By Alan Dexter*

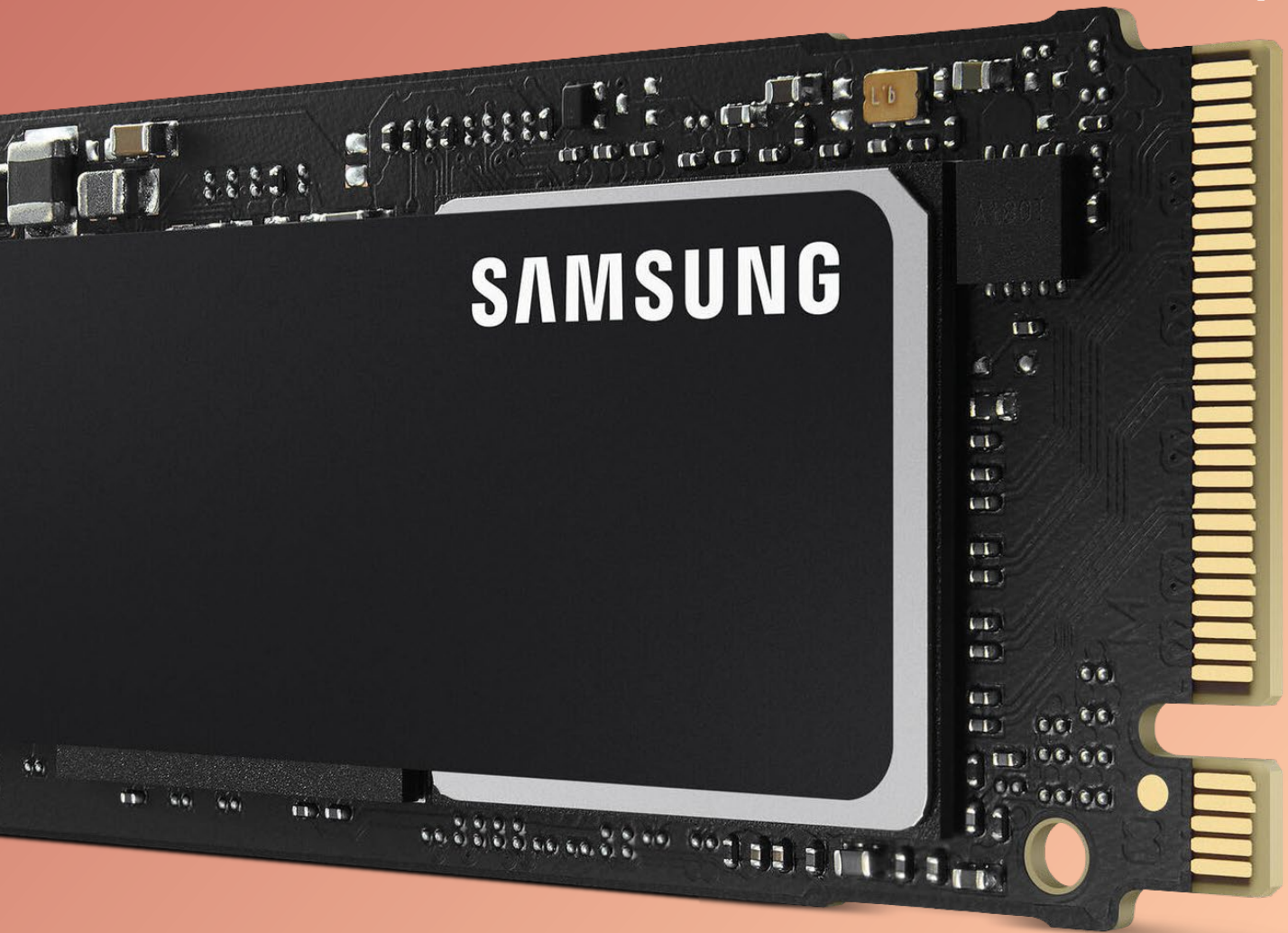
One of the easiest ways of giving your system a performance boost is to upgrade your storage. This is particularly true if you're still rocking a spinning hard drive or two, although SATA SSDs will also see a notable speed boost when you upgrade to the latest drives. Right now, the best storage around uses the PCIe 4.0 interface to produce blistering read and write speeds.

At the moment only AMD's Zen 2 and Zen 3 platforms natively support PCIe 4.0 drives, although Intel's next generation of CPUs (codenamed Rocket Lake) will also jump aboard this particular super speedy wagon. So even if you don't have a supporting platform right now, you will do when you next upgrade, which is why we think that moving over to a PCIe 4.0 supporting SSD is the best way of protecting your storage investment.



2





1

980 Pro 500GB

SAMSUNG **£135**

The fastest next-gen SSD money can buy

1 Samsung has been the go-to name for SSD storage for years, and while a long time coming, the 980 Pro with its next-gen Elpis controller has been well worth the wait. If you're looking for the best headline performance right now, then nothing else can really challenge it. With sequential read and write speeds hitting 6,900MB/s and 5,000MB/s, incredible 800K IOPS for random performance, and the awesome Magician software making managing the drive a breeze. The 980 Pro is the performance junkie's drive of choice.

The only problem is the price, particularly on this 500GB model. At £135 that equates to 27p a gigabyte, which is a bit much. The 1TB drive for £230 is slightly better value at 23p a gigabyte, although even here there are better deals to be had for almost the same performance. Real world performance is that much better than some of the other drives here either, so you're going to need that extreme throughput.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Awesome sequential throughput
- Strong random access
- Samsung Magician

SPECS CAPACITY: 500GB / CONTROLLER: SAMSUNG ELPIS / MEMORY: SAMSUNG 3-BIT MLC
/ INTERFACE: M.2 PCIe 4.0 X4 / SEQ. READ: 6,900MB/S / SEQ. WRITE: 5,000MB/S

Rocket 2TB Gen4

SABRENT **£360**

The best budget next-gen SSD

2 Like a lot of the drives here the Sabrent Rocket Gen4 SSD uses the Phison E16 controller, which is a decent PCIe 4.0 controller, although it does lag behind the more recent Samsung Elpis controller that can be found in the 980 Pro. That means the peak sequential figures are slightly off the pace, and the randoms are a bit slower as well, although in real terms there's hardly anything between them. In fact in terms of file copying, this Sabrent drive was moderately quicker. When it comes to game loads, there's less than a second between the

fastest and slowest as well. They're all pretty fast basically. There's a real price war going on with these next-gen drives and price fluctuations are common. Sabrent seems to stay out in front though, and given the overall package it's this drive that gets the nod from us. 2,000GB at £360 equate to 18p a gigabyte, which is nothing to sniff at. The 1TB version offers even great value for money at 17p a gigabyte.

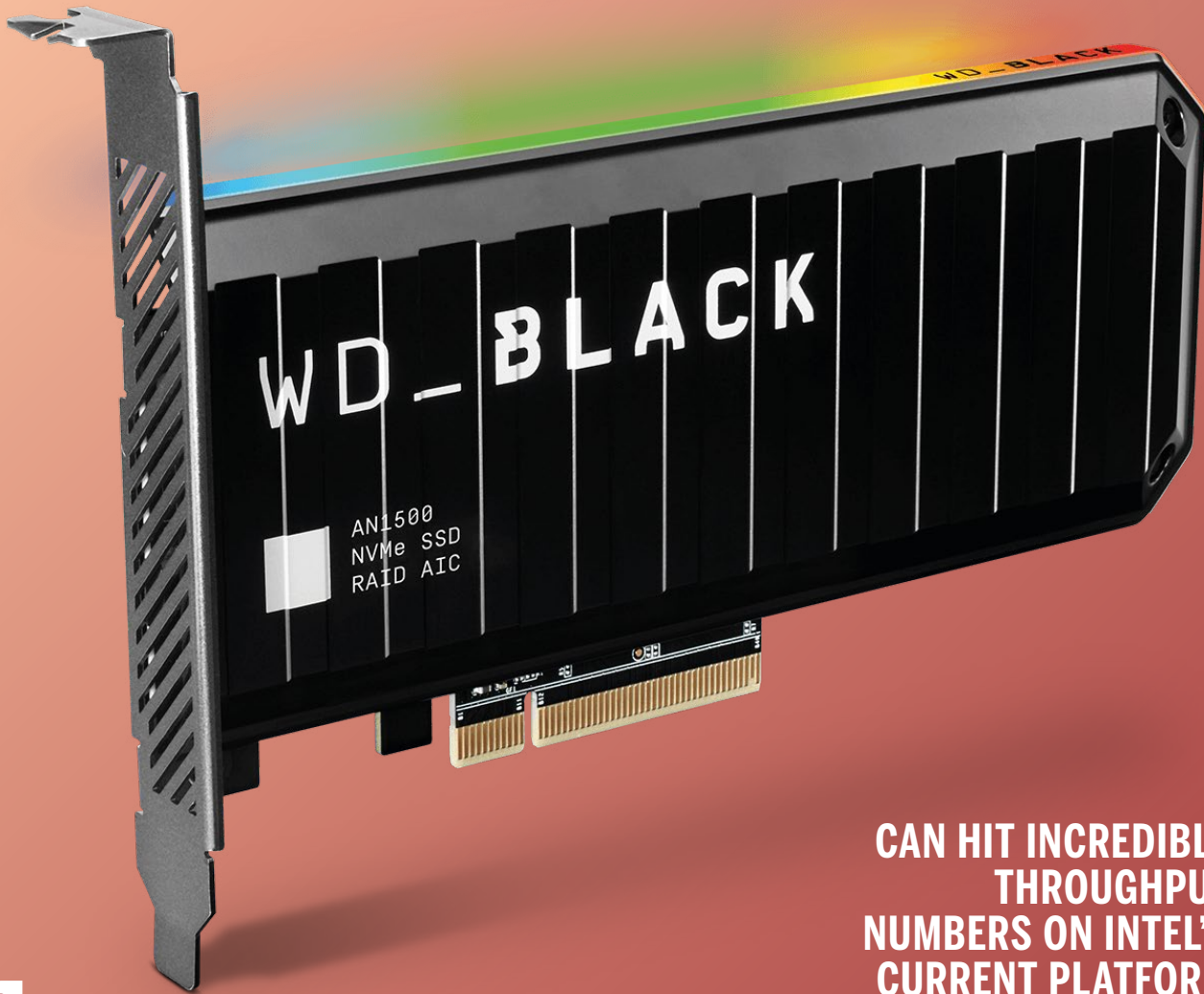
PC GAMER VERDICT

- Strong performance and capacity
- The best value for money
- Good software suite

SPECS CAPACITY: 2TB / CONTROLLER: PHISON PS5016-E16 / MEMORY: TOSHIBA 3D TLC
/ INTERFACE: M.2 PCIe 4.0 X4 / SEQ. READ: 5,000MB/S / SEQ. WRITE: 4,400MB/S



GROUP TEST



CAN HIT INCREDIBLE THROUGHPUT NUMBERS ON INTEL'S CURRENT PLATFORM

3

Black AN1500 2TB

WESTERN DIGITAL **£452**

Next-gen performance for PCIe 3.0 motherboards

3 Apart from looking completely different to the rest of the drives in this group test, this Western Digital drive is actually a bit of a cheat entry because it isn't actually a PCIe 4.0 drive at all. No, this WD Black add-in-card is actually a PCIe 3.0 device that manages to hit next-gen levels of performance thanks to running a pair of M.2 PCIe 3.0 drives as a striped array. This means it can hit incredible throughput numbers on Intel's current platforms, or AMD's first-gen Ryzen CPUs.

Such performance will cost you of course, and in this case

there's a very real hit on your wallet waiting if you want to see what 6.5GB/s reads feel like. You will need a free PCIe 3.0 x8 slot in order to hit these performance figures too, which could knock your graphics card bandwidth down to x8 throughput as well (not as big a deal as you might think), depending on your platform. Even so, this is a clever solution that could give older systems a new lease of life.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Impressively strong performance
- Decent software suite
- Great looking

SPECS CAPACITY: 2TB / CONTROLLER: MARVELL 88NR2241 / MEMORY: WD 96L TLC
/ INTERFACE: PCIe 3.0 X8 AIC / SEQ. READ: 6,500MB/S / SEQ. WRITE: 4,100MB/S

Aorus 1TB NVMe Gen4

GIGABYTE **£179**

A next-gen drive that adds a little old school bling

4 On release there was so little between the Corsair MP600 and this Gigabyte Aorus drive that you wouldn't be able to tell them apart even if you had a whole raft of benchmark results to look over. And that's because beneath the wildly different heatsinks, they were essentially the same drives; using the same Phison E16 controller and the same Toshiba 3D TLC NAND flash.

Since launch, however, Gigabyte has tweaked the firmware of the drive so that it performs slightly better, and more on a par with the likes of

the Sabrent and Addlink drives. This means that we recommend it over the Corsair MP600, but honestly the difference is so slight you probably wouldn't notice in the real world. About the only thing that is different is that copper heatsink, which adds a certain retro charm to any motherboard – it also does a decent job of keeping the SSD cool. Just make sure you have room for it in your case before you buy.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Strong overall performance
- Good value for money
- Integrated heatsink

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / CONTROLLER: PHISON PS5016-E16 / MEMORY: TOSHIBA 3D TLC
/ INTERFACE: M.2 PCIe 4.0 X4 / SEQ. READ: 5,000MB/S / SEQ. WRITE: 4,400MB/S

4



5



6

TOMORROW'S PERFORMANCE

PCIe 4.0 SSDs are the fastest drives you can buy at 'reasonable' prices right now, offering higher sequential performance and improved random read and writes over everything we've seen before. While the performance can be incredible in benchmarks, when copying files and loading games it's fair to say that they aren't fully utilised just yet. A shift to make the most out of these next-gen SSDs that could potentially banish loading times as we know it, and make for more seamless transitions between areas.

What form this will actually take, and how it'll fit into a landscape that still has gamers running hard drives is tricky to fathom, but we wouldn't be surprised if future titles demand a certain level of SSD performance in their system requirements.

S90 1TB

ADDLINK **£187**

An affordable up-to-date next-gen SSD

5 When the Addlink S90 was first released there was nothing else really out there that competed, and thus quickly became the goto next-gen drive. Since then other manufacturers have caught on to the fact that budget drives can sell in decent numbers, and so pricing has tumbled across the board. This is good for us as buyers, but it means you've got to keep on your toes. At the time of writing the Corsair, Gigabyte and 1TB Sabrent drives are all cheaper than this, and it does put the Addlink S90 in a bit of awkward spot – particularly

as this is a budget drive first and foremost.

The good news is that it is a more up-to-date take on the Phison E16 controller that can be found elsewhere, meaning it offers ever so slightly better performance than the Corsair and Gigabyte drives. So while they're slightly cheaper, this has a slight edge in terms of peak throughput, and that's a price we think is worth coughing up for.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Strong overall performance
- Good value for money
- Excellent endurance

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON PS5016-E16 / **MEMORY:** TOSHIBA 3D TLC
/ **INTERFACE:** M.2 PCIe 4.0 X4 / **SEQ. READ:** 5,000MB/S / **SEQ. WRITE:** 4,400MB/S

MP600 1TB

CORSAIR **£173**

A next-gen drive that offers good value for money

6 This Corsair SSD was one of the first PCIe 4.0 drives to appear, with AMD grabbing a bunch of these (and the Gigabyte ones) to ship out with the first review samples of its Zen 2 processors. That was a year and a half ago now, but these drives are still going strong and offering decent value for money thanks to some keen price cuts.

Newer drives have scraped a bit more out of the Phison controller and the NAND flash, which is why this SSD is slightly lower down the list, but it's still a quality offering. The fact that this ships with a big heatsink

can work in its favour too, although make sure there's room for it on your motherboard, as Corsair doesn't recommend removing the cooler in order to slot it under any cooling offered by your motherboard, as it runs a bit hot.

It is inexpensive for a 1TB drive, and is also faster than any PCIe 3.0 SSD around. There are more affordable versions on their way, and potentially faster ones too, but this one is here today.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Decent next-gen performance
- Great value for money
- Integrated heatsink

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / **CONTROLLER:** PHISON PS5016-E16 / **MEMORY:** TOSHIBA 3D TLC / **INTERFACE:** M.2 PCIe 4.0 X4
/ **SEQ. READ:** 4,950MB/S / **SEQ. WRITE:** 4,250MB/S



Clinattec's exoskeleton, which allowed the patient Thibault to walk again.

MIND READING

Brain-computer interfaces could revolutionise the way we live

A lot of sci-fi ideas seem to have their roots in the '70s. We don't know whether it's the availability of mind-bending drugs at the time, or the free love, or the fashions, but something seems to have sparked off a load of ideas that still seem modern today.

One of those ideas is the brain/computer interface (BCI), which you kind of expect Elon Musk to talk about in the same way he might discuss hollowing out a volcano, but sit up and take notice when Valve starts talking about it too. Research into them began in the '70s, and earlier this year the UK Government received a report into them from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, in which it was stated that entertainment companies are developing non-invasive BCIs "to play computer games". This no doubt made a few honourable members wonder what a 'computer game' was, but the next sentence is even better: these products are currently being offered to consumers.

Non-invasive BCIs, which use sensors worn on the skull, are a world away from the invasive type Musk is implanting in the skulls of pigs, which he describes as "kind of like a Fitbit in your skull with tiny wires". We're not sure we'd want that, but for anyone who's suffered a disconnection between their brain and the rest of their body, perhaps as a result of an accident, an implant may be able to reconnect the nerve signals.

Take the case of two subjects in a recent DARPA-supported clinical trial carried out by the University of Melbourne, Australia. Both suffer from upper-limb paralysis thanks to ALS, also known as motor neurone disease, they were fitted with tiny wires that picked up electrical signals from the nervous system, and passed the results to a computer. This was able to distinguish between the different types of signals received when the subjects thought about different things, and these were mapped to various computer commands, including moving the mouse on an unmodified Windows 10 PC. By adding an eye-tracker, they were able to send messages, order online shopping, and use internet banking. They were then allowed to take the interfaces home, and achieved click-selection accuracy rates of over 92 percent. Sadly, there was no mention of whether they used this new ability to play *StarCraft II*.

The surgery required for the interfaces is described as 'minimally invasive' by the study's authors, but still means wires in your brain – specifically the superior sagittal sinus adjacent to the primary motor cortex – inserted through veins using a tiny expandable tube called a stent. This is probably what Musk's pig has gone through too – although the South African-born billionaire suffered a blow in September when a survey suggested 90 percent of people wouldn't use one, with 32 percent worried it could be used for spying. The survey, carried out by OnBuy.com, was hardly scientifically rigorous,



Cyborg

In 2019, a man called Thibault was able to walk in a mind-controlled exoskeleton after being paralysed in an accident. The tech, from French firm Clinattec and Grenoble Alpes Hospital, took a few months to master using a videogame-like training system. Brainwave recording devices were implanted at the sides of his head, reading the motor cortex of Thibault's brain.

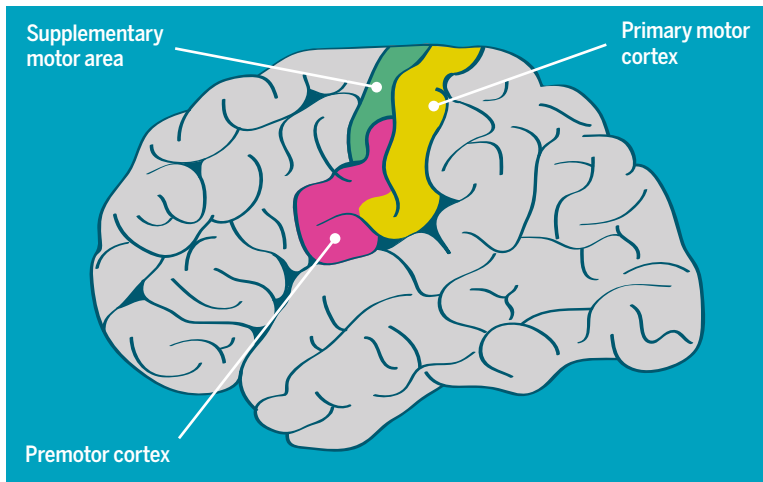
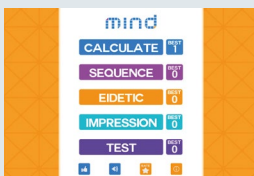
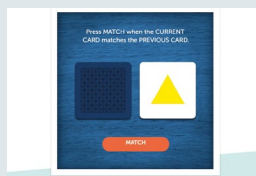


Image credit: Myndplay

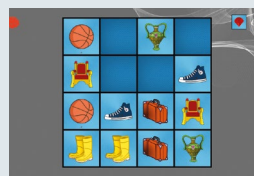
LEARNING *Videogames don't need a physical connection to affect our minds*



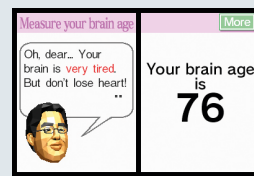
1 MEMORY
On the Windows Store, *Mind: Brain Training* is a series of number and memory puzzles.



2 SMARTS
Luminosity aims to help you improve memory, increase focus and feel sharper.



3 COMMONSENSE
On Steam, *Power Brain Trainer* aims to train your memory and more.



4 NEW SKILLS
Dr. Kawashima's Brain Training: How Old Is Your Brain? for the DS was released in 2005.

TOP LEFT: The position of the motor cortex within the human brain.

ABOVE: The Myndplay headset connects to a PC via Bluetooth and is rechargeable over USB.

and Musk can take comfort in the 73 percent of respondents who claimed to be excited by the technology.

His firm, Neuralink, states its initial goals are similar to the Melbourne trial: to help people with paralysis to regain independence through the control of computers and mobile devices. Neuralink hopes to connect directly to thousands of neurons in the brain, sending the information to a computer where it's processed and initially used to control a mouse. This will be expanded, as the recipient becomes more skilled and the algorithms more tightly focused, to a keyboard, speech synthesis and – yes – a game controller.

Just because you're controlling a controller with your mind doesn't mean you'll be playing *Doom Eternal* all day, of course, they have other applications, perhaps tied into the control system of a motorised wheelchair. But it does open the door to brain-controlled gaming. Neuralink says it hopes to 'discover' non-medical uses for the technology.

MIND CONTROL

Controlling games with your brain isn't new. In 2010 a man was able to use an EEG (electroencephalogram) brain-scanning helmet known as the Berlin Brain-Computer Interface to play pinball (an Addams Family-themed table, for fans of spooky disembodied movement) at the CeBIT technology fair in Hannover, Germany. British company MyndPlay will sell you its MyndBand EEG headband, with three sensors that fit over your forehead, for £200, and there's an SDK for you to create something to use it with.

Actual PC software seems a little sparse, however, with a mind-controlled media player, a rugby ball-kicking app and various quizzes the main events. There are also apps to train your brain, making yourself calmer, treating self-doubt, dealing with feelings of anger or guilt, and ones to help you meditate, rewarding you for entering a relaxed mental state.

It seems neural interfaces are here, and in the case of MyndPlay actually functional, but we're not quite sure what to do with them. The UK Government report mentions their use in therapy, as well as applications for marketing – gaining insights into consumer decision-making direct from the brain – and defence. There are also ethical considerations to be

taken into account when fishing data directly from the living surface of our brains, and an ethical framework was published by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics in 2013, which deal with the effects the withdrawal of beneficial products may have on their

former user, among other things, and that non-therapeutic devices must be regulated because they are likely to be used in private and without medical supervision. It recommended the European Commission regulate BCIs as medical devices no matter what their intended use.

When they break through to the mainstream, however, it remains to be seen if BCIs will be treated like Wi-Fi kettles – an amusing but largely unnecessary product with its roots in helping the disabled – or like VR, a more serious product that will continue to gain traction as the initial high prices come down. We wouldn't bet against the latter. ■

Ian Evenden

NEURALINK SAYS IT HOPES TO 'DISCOVER' NON-MEDICAL USES FOR THE TECHNOLOGY

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£849

MOTHERBOARD		B450-A Pro Max MSI £95 A healthy dose of ports and PCIe SSD support has this B450 at the heart of our budget build.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 3 3300X AMD £115 AMD has packed its Zen 2 architecture into a speedy four-core package, and that's great for gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce GTX 1650 Super Gigabyte £165 The GTX 1650 Super is much more than a rebrand of the GTX 1650, securing it the budget crown.
COOLER		Wraith Stealth AMD Free with the CPU Gone are the days when a stock cooler was little more than a bonus paperweight. AMD's Wraith Stealth delivers.
MEMORY		Vengeance 8GB DDR4 (2x4GB) Corsair £40 The new norm for gaming is 16GB, but dual-channel 8GB memory is enough to get by for most.
POWER SUPPLY		CX Series CX550 Corsair £74 Corsair's reputation for quality PSUs precedes them. You know you're in safe hands here.
SSD		WD Blue SN550 500GB Western Digital £67 Just because it's a budget SSD, doesn't mean it has to be slow, as the WD SN550 proves with its speedy NVMe connectivity.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,455

MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 KO GAMING EVGA £320 The RTX 2060 is a taste of the good life, where frame rates are high and real-time ray tracing is possible.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £150 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed—the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, and it's AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £80 Does it get any better than the HyperX Cloud Alpha? Well, yes, but not anywhere close to this sort of price point.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,666

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z490 Gaming Carbon WiFi MSI £260 A heady mix of enthusiast motherboard functionality and build quality that stops short of god-tier motherboard pricing.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 10900K Intel £529 If you want the fastest gaming CPU, look no further than Intel's flagship Core i9.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Founders Edition Nvidia £649 The RTX 3080 is the flagship graphics card of an entire new GPU generation.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,200 Corsair £176 If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow in RGB.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN750 1TB Western Digital £169 Western Digital is back on Samsung's heels with this brilliantly fast, yet affordable, 1TB M.2 NVMe SSD.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to a HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“If you love exploring vibrant worlds, this is the game for you”

GENSHIN IMPACT is near-perfect JRPG comfort food, even if it's a little shady

If you told me that one of my favourite games in 2020 would be a free-to-play RPG with 'gacha' microtransactions, I'd never have believed you. Yet here I am, approaching what is close to my 60th hour in *Genshin Impact*. It's a brilliant game – so long as you aren't overly offended by some sketchy in-game purchases.

It's easy to forgive that stuff, though, because *Genshin Impact* is genuinely a joy to play. It ditches the modern trend of big open worlds littered with icons and instead takes a more intuitive approach, forcing you to use your faculties to find hidden treasures, collectibles and loot that'll

STEVEN MESSNER



THIS MONTH
Poured over every nook and cranny in Teyvat.

ALSO PLAYED
League of Legends, *World of Warcraft*

power up your party of four characters. I'm constantly skeptical of the environment around me – suspiciously unlit torches might be a little puzzle in disguise, or a peculiar arrangement of rocks might actually be a subtle sign that there's a hidden treasure chest nearby.

LOST AND FOUND

It's a simple idea elegantly executed, making the world of Teyvat a

pleasure to explore as you detour from one puzzle to the next, kicking over stones and stopping to fight monsters along the way. It's the kind of game that has mastered a short and sweet reward loop that makes hours melt away, which is the perfect remedy after a year that's forced most of us to spend our free time indoors. If you love exploring vibrant worlds, this is the game for you.

Since it launched, I've been obsessed with exploring every inch of Teyvat, which currently comprises

SINCE IT LAUNCHED, I'VE BEEN OBSESSED WITH EXPLORING EVERY INCH OF TEYVAT



Genshin looks like Zelda, but plays like Ni No Kuni II.



Story quests are a nice break from adventuring.

Diluc
Just differences in approach is all.

two massive regions with more on the way. While packs of monsters dot the landscape, the real fun is in discovering all the little mysteries. I might find elemental totems that require a certain kind of magic to activate, revealing a hidden chest, or I'll find little spirits called Seelies that'll lead me on a wild goose chase to some treasure. From a distance, I can often spot floating oculi that can be offered to special statues to increase my stamina – letting me climb or swim for a bit longer.

It's a world I can't stop spending time in, partly because it's so densely layered with fun surprises but also because it's just so beautiful. The region of Liyue is one of my favourite areas I've seen in a game in years because it's styled like ancient China, complete with rice farms, mountains and a bustling trading port.

I just wish the microtransactions weren't so pointless. While the game throws free characters at you that can be swapped into your party, most are earned from lootboxes with ridiculous drop rates. The currency needed to buy them can be earned just by playing, so I haven't needed to spend any money on them directly, but it's frustrating how impossible it feels to earn a specific hero that I'm gunning for. Still, *Genshin Impact* is an astounding free-to-play game that feels uncommonly generous. I've played it for dozens of hours and don't plan on stopping – even though I resent its lootboxes. ■



Some of the metal balls are plants, some are rocks and some seem to just be decoration. I'm sick of balls.

“I don't want to live on Robot World”

Trying to find the fun in **NO MAN'S SKY**

▶ **ROBIN VALENTINE**



THIS MONTH
Boldly went where no one wanted to go before.

ALSO PLAYED
Darkest Dungeon, Legends of Runeterra

Hello Games' epic always looks so amazingly magical from afar. I see my friends' screenshots of glorious alien vistas, and I want to find some of my own. I see the latest updates, introducing all sorts of new wonders to discover, and I long to see it all for myself. But every time I try, the game seems ever more unwelcome to me.

I'm not sure I've ever gotten out of what amounts to the extended tutorial. It seems to get longer and more convoluted with each update – and, somehow, the exciting new features always ruin my fun, rather than enhancing it.

The last time I tried was shortly after the full multiplayer update was introduced, and while I was grinding through the opening stages, trying to scrape together enough resources to move on, a bunch of other players turned up, jacked all my stuff and left me destitute.

This time I'm at the mercy of the new *Origins* update, which has added more weirdness and variety to the

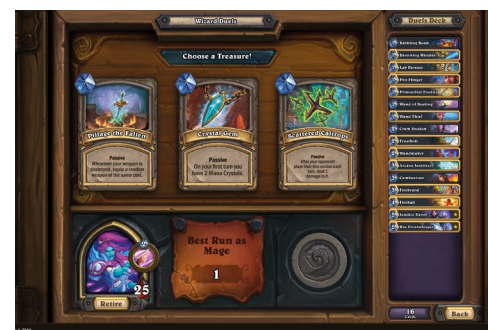
universe. But perhaps too much. My starting planet is a bizarre mech world that I can't make head nor tail of. There are floating metal balls everywhere – my scanner says they're plants, which is difficult to believe – and instead of rocks and minerals, there's just loads of scrap. Even the 'animals' – actually abstract balls of light – are inscrutable. It's novel, sure, but it's not a welcoming place to get stuck.

BALLS TO THIS

And stuck I seem to be, because the game wants me to stay here until I've learned the secrets of crafting, upgrading, building a base, and who knows what else. I spend hours wandering its lifeless surface, hunting down grey hunks of metal. It feels like I've been banished here as some kind of punishment.

I reach my breaking point when I'm asked to find alien artefacts beneath the surface of the planet. The problem is, this world doesn't seem to have any. I trek for miles in search of them before eventually deciding to give up for the night. It's at this point I realise I can only save by returning to my ship – which takes 20 minutes of real-time walking back through the same barren plains I've just hiked across.

Listen, Hello Games: I just want to see all these lovely things you've made. I don't want to live on Robot World any more. When do I get to do all of the fun stuff? ■



“It feels like a wacky spin on the usual format rather than a fresh new entity”

Digging for treasure in **HEARTHSTONE'S** bonkers new Duels mode

Hearthstone's new Duels mode feels a bit like playing the results of a teleporter accident. Blizzard has spliced something I love with something I very much do not. The result feels like an amped up version of the already fairly deranged main game.

The unevenness comes as no surprise given that, as I write this, Duels is in Early Access. Borrowing from Arena, your aim is to build a deck capable of racking up 12 wins against human opponents – but lose three times and you're out. Where the Dungeon Run element comes in is that you add to the deck after each game, picking bundles of cards from themed 'buckets' which will nudge your playstyle in a particular direction.

So far, so *Hearthstone*. The real spice comes from the inclusion of Treasure cards, some of which are blatantly overpowered. These include spells, minions and passive buffs. Again, you're given a choice of three, and what's offered tends to define both how long your deck lasts and how much fun you have playing it. For example: Band of Bees makes all your minions which cost two or less

▶ **TIM CLARK**



THIS MONTH
Found out the true treasure was inside him all along.

ALSO PLAYED
Destiny 2,
Hades

Poisonous, which means Pen Flinger can kill anything.

And then there's Wax Rager. This is a 5/1 Minion which resummons itself upon Death. So the only way to actually remove the bastard is with a Silence effect. I was agog when one opponent played this into a passive Treasure that meant the first Deathrattle of each turn triggered automatically, giving him two Wax Ragers and effectively ending the game on the spot.

What I like best about the mode is that because the ten classes have unique hero powers, and because you can use select expansions from the past when building your 15 card (no

duplicates) starter deck, Duels feels like it has its own distinct flavour.

PICK A CARD

The use of old cards has led to some backlash from players who've been dusting the Wild cards in their collection. I have some sympathy, but honestly the exact design of your starter deck is much less important than the treasures you discover along the way. Just build any sort of half-decent tempo deck that can deal with early aggro and you'll do OK. As with Arena, my interest dwindles when you get a poor selection of starting Heroes, or trash treasures, and the run turns into a slog.

Duels will likely also be helped by the changes to the way *Hearthstone's* incentive systems work, which should mean that playing any mode is almost equally rewarding in terms of XP gained on the Tavern Pass. I don't think it's likely to find quite the same rapt audience that Battlegrounds has, because it feels like a wacky spin on the usual format rather than an entirely fresh new entity. Honestly, I'm just glad *Hearthstone* has shaken off its lethargy and is becoming the kind of game for which launching new modes is the norm. ■

THE USE OF OLD CARDS HAS LED TO SOME BACKLASH FROM PLAYERS

“Alt-tabbing out between runs to take notes, I find my fingers are rattling”

POST VOID is an assault on the senses – in a good way

This is the kind of game you don't describe so much as circle around, making occasional stabs with the ol' metaphor-knife in the hope of hitting something solid. I could tell you that it's a retro-shooter-adjacent roguelike, where you sprint around randomly-generated hallways blasting baddies and desperately seeking the exit... but that wouldn't capture the way it feels to play. And it certainly doesn't explain why, when alt-tabbing out between runs to take notes, I so often find my fingers are rattling against the keyboard.

It's easy to reach for the substances, comparatively speaking. Not least because of the way *Post Void* looks: all woozy edges and bright colours and men in suits who have something wrong with their faces. But, the best parallel I can draw from personal experience is: have you ever had three espressos within half an hour? *Post Void* is the can't-sit-still jitters, crystallised into a 4.68MB executable.

And that's all down to the glass idol held in my left in-game hand, a glowing liquid sloshing around inside.

ALEX SPENCER



THIS MONTH
Gave himself an adrenaline shot to the heart.

ALSO PLAYED
Spelunky 2,
Hades

The idol is a brilliant mechanic, one lifted straight from the (sadly non-existent) videogame adaptation of *Crank*. You know *Crank*, right? The Jason Statham movie wherein they inject him with a poison that turns his heart into the bus from *Speed*, meaning if he slows down for a second, stops doing action-movie shit like shooting people or crashing cars, he'll die? Yeah, that.

See, the liquid inside is your health – getting hit will send some spilling to the ground – but also the idol's a bit leaky, meaning it doubles as a countdown timer, like one of the water clocks they use in the *Crystal*

THE IDOL'S A BIT LEAKY, MEANING IT DOUBLES AS A COUNTDOWN TIMER

Maze. You need to keep pushing forward, killing enemies to top yourself up, all the while praying you'll find the white light of the exit around the next corner.

Add to that the whirling soundtrack, and the strobe effects, and the cacophony that greets you on death, and the way the floor undulates so that just running ahead is a ride on a rollercoaster, and you've got a game that goes for all of your senses simultaneously.

SCREAMAGER

But it works because *Post Void* is a short, sharp shock. At the end of a decent run, seeing less than three minutes on the clock just feels instinctively wrong. This is, I think, because it cuts straight to the feeling that, in most games – the dying moments of a hard-fought deathmatch or narrowly dodging through a new world of traps in *Spelunky* – would take 20 minutes or so to tap into. *Post Void* gets my heart racing almost immediately. And for as long as I can stand it before jumping out to the safety of a Word document for a breather, I feel alive. Which, let's be honest, is a rare enough sensation here in 2020. ■



RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

Hands-on with the final season, *Operation Neon Dawn*. *By Morgan Park*

If you haven't checked in with *Rainbow Six Siege* in a while, you might have missed that its technology has become pretty wild. In 2020, *Rainbow Six's* operational budget includes laser cameras, moving holograms, smart glasses and now laser gates. That's right, *Operation Neon Dawn* adds Aruni to the roster – a Thai detective who deploys laser gates and pulverises walls with her Big Boss-like prosthetic limbs. She is radiating coolness from every direction.

It seems like Ubisoft had a lot of fun with her design, and I love any chance to naturally incorporate aspects of an operator's identity with their functionality. This is no repeat of Oryx, whose wall-smashing ability is satisfying yet mostly useless in practice. Aruni's Surya laser gates are complex, potentially meta-shifting defensive tools.

GATED COMMUNITY

The hard details of Aruni's Surya gate are a lot to take in. She can deploy her three laser gate projectors on any door, hatch, or wall (reinforced or soft). On walls, one gadget will project spy movie-style laser wires across the length of one reinforcement. If a wall takes three reinforcements to completely cover, that's how many Suryas it requires. Laser gates won't stop bullets, but it will intercept any thrown gadget – Trax Stingers, grenades, Capitão bolts, everything. After zapping a gadget (or enemy) the gate will shut down for 30 seconds to recharge.

The real kicker? The projector itself is completely indestructible. No amount of explosions, bullets, or swings from Sledge's hammer can destroy it (I tried). Even the most durable Siege gadgets can be destroyed by grenades or hard breach charges, but Aruni must've found some Vibranium. The Surya's strengths and weaknesses are

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE December, 2020	DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montreal
PUBLISHER Ubisoft	LINK bit.ly/2UIOUde

important to note, because they represent a shift in gadget denial. With Jäger's ADS now working on a similar cooldown and Wamai losing one MAG-NET, coordinated attackers can capitalise on this new window to push the site undeterred.

Like a more nuanced Castle, Aruni can dramatically slow down a push and occasionally stop attackers completely (if I'm below 30 health and have nothing to burn on the gate, it'll simply kill me). As someone who almost always anchors on defence, it's also nice to see a gadget that compliments that play style even better than *Year 4's* Wamai.

Aruni is the first operator with a DMR on defence – she borrows Dokkaebi's Mk14 EBR. If Ubi is

feeling some trepidation about tossing a DMR into a defender's hands, it makes sense that it's testing the waters with the weakest one in the game. That said, at 60 damage per shot it outclasses Goyo/Kaid's TCSG shotgun, and has extremely low recoil.

OLD MAP, NEW FEEL

The final map rework of 2020 is Skyscraper, a map that I've hated with a passion for years. Defence or attack, I've never jived with its claustrophobic hallways, exterior balconies, and lack of fun bomb sites. The rework still feels a lot like the original for better and worse, but it's safe to say that it's an improvement.

Gone are most of those terrible balconies, replaced by scalable walls and windows. Upstairs, Dragon Terrace now has a roof over its head. This small change completely rewrites how Tea Room is defended,

HARD DETAILS OF ARUNI'S SURYA GATE ARE A LOT TO TAKE IN

as there's a new indoor rotation that doesn't force you to take the stairs. The best improvement is the near-extermination of the exterior balconies. I really hated them.

I've had a really great time with *Siege's* first full year of map reworks. Reworking maps can be tricky business when you risk changing the identity of a map that players have loved for years. This year, each rework has, in my mind, maintained the map's personality and unique features while remodelling areas that really needed it. With plenty more maps in the hopper that could be improved (looking at you Outback, Fortress and Coastline), I'm perfectly happy with reworks now. After all, every good rework is also one fewer bad map.

As *Year 5* comes to a close, it's been interesting to watch Ubisoft's priorities with the game evolve over time to prioritise quality over quantity. *Year 6* will add only four new operators to the game. I like new stuff, so it's bittersweet, but I'm excited by the game's maturing meta and how the operator design will adapt to it. Bring it on. ■

SKY SCRAPED

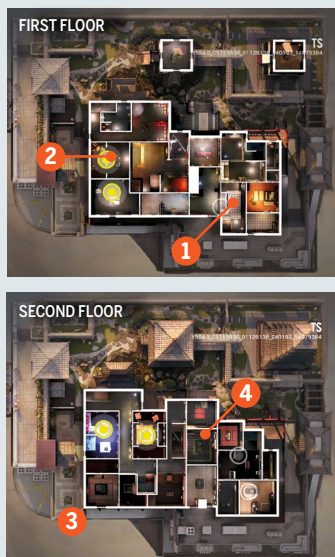
Delve into the reworked map

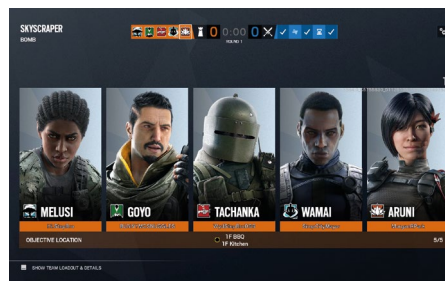
1 BATHROOM
Newly expanded to feel less claustrophobic. One window has now been closed.

2 BBQ
BBQ's deadly window has been closed to give anchors a fighting chance.

3 BALCONIES
Most of Skyscraper's exterior balconies have been demolished to mitigate runouts.

4 DRAGON
The dragon terrace is now inside, giving players more rotation across the second floor.





The Ultra Luxe has never been so flush with fresh meat.



A fresh coat of paint for the strip after a decade.





FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

Mods to remaster the Mojave in 2021. *By Lauren Morton*

Ever since Microsoft announced its Bethesda acquisition, *Fallout: New Vegas* has been on my mind.

With Obsidian and Bethesda now sharing the Microsoft umbrella, speculation about a sequel or remaster to the western apocalypse are both rampant. I highly doubt we'll see either of those two things happen. Not soon, in any case.

Although an official remaster would be nice, *Fallout: New Vegas* has recently passed its tenth anniversary, meaning it has a decade of mods accumulated for making your own remastered version. Ten years of mods is quite a pile to sift through though. Some have been abandoned and others are redundant. Some are shiny and new but less developed than other old faithful options.

In honour of its big birthday, I'm setting out to find the most faithful and reliable collection of mods for a homebrew *Fallout: New Vegas* remaster. Although there are a ton of great quest mods and gameplay changes out there, I've stuck to mods that keep the original experience of

New Vegas intact as much as possible while making it crash less, look better, and take advantage of the modern tech we're running it on.

FOUNDATION FIRST

As other Creation Engine games do, *New Vegas* has a reputation for being somewhat less than stable. Crashing is a common occurrence even in an un-modded playthrough. Fortunately, there are some foundational mods that help reduce crashes rather than exacerbate them.

The first thing you'll need is a mod whose equivalent you've likely used if you've ever dipped into modding *Fallout* or *Elder Scrolls* games previously. *New Vegas Script Extender* is the foundation that many



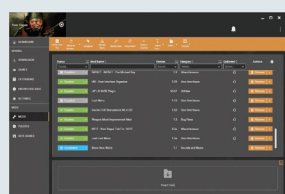
I'VE STUCK TO MODS THAT KEEP THE ORIGINAL EXPERIENCE OF NEW VEGAS INTACT

other mods build on. You can find it at nvse.silverlock.org where you'll download the latest stable version which supports both the Steam and GOG releases. Your second manual installation is going to be the *FNV 4GB Patcher*, a utility that patches and replaces your *FalloutNV.exe* with a version that's capable of using 4GB of RAM. In 2021, you almost certainly have at least double that. You're looking for the 4GB patcher version on Nexus mods created by Roy Batty and LuthienAnarion. Follow the installation instructions and voila, a new *FalloutNV.exe*. Not to worry, the original is preserved as *FalloutNV_backup.exe* should you ever need to manually revert.

That's it for manual installation, so feel free to boot up your mod

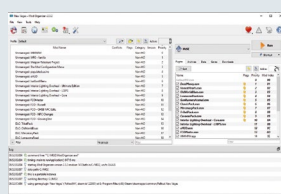


MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE *The resumes for your mod managers*



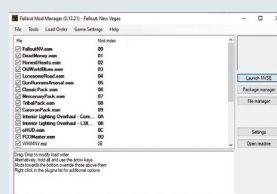
VORTEX

Nexus Mod Manager has been replaced with Vortex. It does a lot to hold your hand and warn you of conflicts between mods that you may have overlooked.



MOD ORGANIZER 2

MO2 is a no-frills approach and doesn't have as difficult a learning curve that it's sometimes alleged to. It also gives more precise control over mod load order.



FALLOUT MOD MANAGER

FOMM is getting long in the tooth. You'll see its name mentioned in install instructions for older mods but you're better off choosing between MO2 or Vortex in 2021.

» manager of choice at this point. To finish out the steady base that the rest of our beautification mods will rest on, you'll want to grab a few more essentials. The *JIP LN NVSE Plugin* is another utility that adds even more functions to the main *NVSE*. *NVTF*, the *New Vegas Tick Fix*, is one of the latest mods for increasing the game's stability. Lastly, *The Mod Configuration Menu* isn't an absolute necessity, but it adds a menu that allows you to change the settings of certain mods while you're playing as you would any other game setting. Not every mod here utilises it, but it's a nice time-saver while you're tinkering, especially with your UI.

USABLE INTERFACE

On that note, let's get to another important factor in any true remaster: an improved UI. *Fallout: New Vegas*, like *Fallout 3* before it, has an interface that would look more at home on an ancient CRT TV. As a modern PC player with way more screen space to make use of than the ones *Fallout's* menus were designed for, you can get a much handier interface with just a handful of mods.

Start off with the *User Interface Organizer*, a plugin that helps all other interface mods play nicely together. *Vanilla HUD Remastered* cleans up and sharpens the elements of your heads up display for higher resolutions. It's a small change, even when I compared screenshots side by side, but contributes to an overall sharper look for our unofficial remaster. *oHUD* is a collection of several other mods under one name that, thanks to the *Mod Configuration Menu* above, you can use to move HUD elements around on the screen or remove entirely.

My own must-have is *Just Loot Menu* – not to be confused with plain *Loot Menu* which is also nice but is my second favourite of the two. It's a mod that adds a *Fallout* 4-style menu for looting containers that allows you to take items without loading a separate menu. Compared with *Loot Menu*, *Just Loot Menu* has more configurable options in the *Mod Configuration Menu* and comes out of the tin with a smaller font and better spacing.

Last up on the UI list is *MTUI*, a mod that improves and resizes the PipBoy menus, shop menus and dialogue. It does add a new texture in the background of dialogue selection that may or may not be to your taste. The mod's page gives a quick explanation on how to revert back to the original black background for dialogue if it's not your style.

BEAUTIFICATION

That brings us to the biggest matters of taste: beautifying *New Vegas* with bigger, newer textures and lighting. Once again, it's easiest to start with a foundational layer and build from there. When we're talking textures, that means roads, walls, concrete, and other environment pieces. Ten years on, *New Vegas'* default textures are a little muddy and a new texture pack can add grittier grit, holier holes and more. Two big texture overhauls have



TEN YEARS ON, A NEW TEXTURE PACK CAN ADD GRITTIER GRIT, HOLIER HOLES AND MORE

become staples for *Fallout: New Vegas* modding. *NMC's Texture Pack* and *Ojo Bueno*. Both are great, so a choice between the two comes down to preference and how much storage space you're willing to throw at it.

NMC's largest set of textures comes as a set of three downloads totalling just over 3GB of new files for those new 2048x2048 textures. *OJB*, on the other hand, is a single mod file with textures the creator says go up to (but not always) 4096x4096 for the 'Ultra' version. That will set you back about 1.5GB. Both *NMC* and *OJB* have versions with smaller textures and therefore smaller file sizes. *NMC* is the more comprehensive option with more textures replaced, but *OJB* has a distinct flair. If you're feeling frisky, you can install both, determining which should be dominant in situations where both have retextured an object by swapping their load order in your mods list.

For retexturing other objects, you'll want to grab *MG's Neat Clutter Retextures* which handles smaller objects that *NMC* and *OJB* pass over. *The Wasteland Flora Overhaul* gives a very nice spit-shine to all the wasteland's plant life. The *Weapon Retexture* project may not update every weapon in the game, but it does hit popular staples. It requires the *Weapon Mesh Improvements* mod as a prerequisite. For lighting and effects, the *Interior Lighting Project* can spruce up indoor areas.

Most important to *Fallout*, though, are the people. It's time to slap a lot more pores on these poor desert dwellers because we all know that more pores means more pixels, right? At present, *Fallout Character Overhaul 3.0* is the vanilla-friendly overhaul for NPCs that requires the least amount of fuss. On the other end you have *New Vegas Redesigned*, which is another very thoughtful reimagining of NPCs that's faithful to the original game, but requires an older version of *Character Overhaul* to be installed first along with other updates of its own, making it a bit more of a chore to try out.

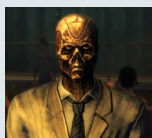
There's also the new *Brave New World* mod, a huge mod that recasts the voices of 140 NPCs, led by the same creator as *NV Redesign*. It's not exactly *New Vegas Redesigned 4*, but does also update the faces of every NPC who's scored a new voice. For now, I opted to install the voices only version of *Brave New World* while sticking with the visuals from *Character Overhaul 3.0*.

As a last shout, two mods that do add more content to the Wasteland without being obtrusive are *Populated Casinos* and the *NV Interiors Project*. The former adds more humans milling about in the gambling rooms of the strip, a breath of fresh air that made more of a difference to me than I'd have expected it to. The latter adds interior areas to formerly inaccessible buildings all over the map that occasionally hide more secrets than just some extra Wonderglue to stuff in your pockets. *New Vegas Interiors* may cross the line between remaster and remake just a bit, but the lore-friendly additions are worth the weight, in my opinion.

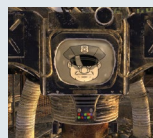
Fallout: New Vegas is getting on in years, but it's not yet immune to a good refresh via mods. After all was said and done, I ended up with a mods list of about 20 choices, which is many fewer than I feared going in. Let's just hope we have another *Fallout* game to play before *Fallout 4* hits the ten-year mark, shall we? ■

TEXTURE EQUITY

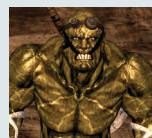
More pixels for non-human people



GHOULS HIRES RETEXTURE
Default ghouls look terrible. They're supposed to. Make them look even worse, in a good way, with a high resolution retexture.



IMPROVED ROBOTS TEXTURES
New Vegas' robots deserve a texture tune-up and this texture mod makes sure you can see every scratch and dent.



IMPROVED SUPER MUTANTS TEXTURES
Super mutants don't need to be as washed up or washed out as their original textures.



In NMC's texture pack even lockpicking gets new textures.



Dialogue requires less scrolling with MTUI.

Why are you on bad terms with Boone?

What was your tour with the NCR like?

What do you protect your town from?

Who are you?

Goodbye.



Explore Teyvat in GENSIN IMPACT

Master the elements and assemble your dream team. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

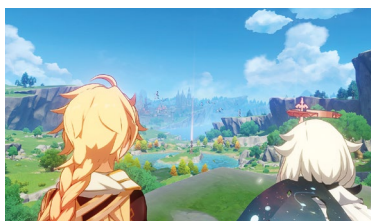
DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
30 Hours

VITAL LINKS
Anemoculus map:
bit.ly/3mtTWhT

Tier list:
bit.ly/2TtfVcv

Best builds:
bit.ly/2TvwDUC



STAY FOCUSED

1 While you'll be tempted to discover every inch of miHoYo's *Breath of the Wild*-style world, mix your exploration with questing. That'll ensure you don't miss out on crucial tools like the wind glider to help you find more secrets and resources.



TAKE IT SLOW

2 There is an option to activate Teleport Waypoints to fast travel between, but I recommend against it. Only do so if you're absolutely certain you've covered the area you're skipping: useful materials, hidden chests and collectibles are everywhere.



CHATTERBOX

3 Talk to as many NPCs as possible. Rather than spouting useless dialogue, many peripheral characters are worth speaking to. Some may secretly have quests to offer you, or they may offer you the chance to buy rare items.



SCAVENGER HUNT

4 See any floating blue orbs? These are Anemoculus, and you should trade as many as you can with the Statue of the Seven in exchange for handy boons. Find them all with our Anemoculus map guide in the 'Vital Links' section.

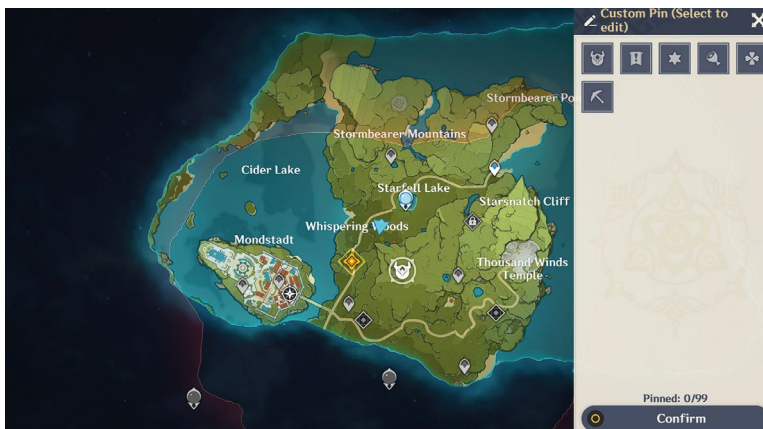


RESIN UP

5 Resin is a currency that limits the rewards you get from certain activities, and it fully recharges once a day. However, it does cap out, so you should spend it straight away, at least in the early stages.

TOP MARKS

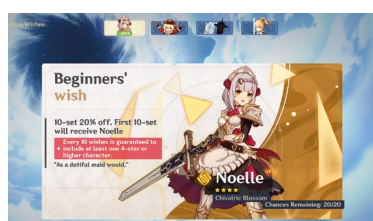
6 If you get stuck on a puzzle, use one of your 99 map markers so you can easily return later. You may find completing a few more main missions gives you an ability you need to get that elusive treasure.



LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

7 Even if you quickly develop favourites, make sure you level your whole party evenly. That's because dungeons have restrictions based on your party's average level, so some of your weaker companions may be a liability in late-stage dungeons.

IN YOUR ELEMENT *Combine elemental traits for devastating combos*



WISHFUL THINKING

8 Wishes are *Genshin Impact*'s loot boxes, but you'll earn enough to buy them just by playing that you don't need to spend real money. Make sure to spend your Wishes in groups of ten to get at least the second-rarest tier of rewards.



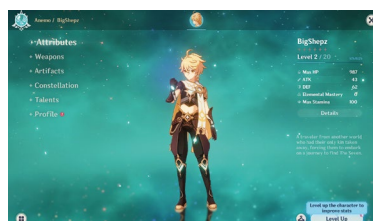
DINNER TIME

9 While you don't necessarily need to eat to survive, chowing down is well worthwhile. Not only will some foods restore HP, others will also temporarily reduce the stamina costs of climbing, gliding, or running, which is useful for exploring.



STOCK UP

10 There are various ways to accumulate a lot of precious resources. Make sure you're ticking off tasks for loot in the Achievements menu and claiming Adventurer's Guild rewards from the daily quest vendor in Mondstadt.



ASCENSION

11 You can raise your characters' level cap through Ascension, but you'll need to reach at least Adventure Rank 15, first. You'll also need various upgrade materials found by beating bosses in the world. For rarer materials, you'll need Resin.



START OVER?

12 Unhappy with your characters and weapons? Since *Genshin Impact* is a gacha game, it's possible to create a new account and reroll. But remember the rarest returns have a 0.6 percent chance of dropping.



DIARY

TRYING TO
BE JUST AND
PIOUS IN

CRUSADER KINGS III

PART II

Nicety and piety are leading
to calamity. *By Luke Kemp*

THE RULES

1 Strive to be noble and just in all decisions.

2 Treat everybody I come across with civility and respect.

3 Punish any and all un-chivalric behaviour with appropriate zeal.

Q uick recap: I'm trying to ignore the urges this game inspires in me and everybody else, and be lovely, kind and noble at every possible opportunity; unless I catch anybody being in any way immoral, then they shall feel my pious wrath. After losing every square inch of the kingdom of England with a speed that I almost feel I should be proud of, I moved on to Jarl Isleifur of medieval Iceland. My jolly nature has won me a friend named Yosi... and bandits running rampant throughout my realm thanks to my lack of ruthlessness. After going on a pilgrimage hoping for a bit of deus ex machina, I am now returned, holier than a wagon full of Swiss cheese but in debt thanks to the costs of my travel.

The money situation is swiftly and easily dealt with when I reluctantly ask the pope for some gold. We're on very good terms, me and Alex, so he totally understands and retains a very positive view of me. It's not all good news, though, as Count Sigfus – a vassal I've been trying to win round for a few years now – still doesn't think much of me. Then I remember that he thought I was planning to nick his gold when I warned him it wasn't very well guarded, and I messed up his library when I tried to help him organise it. I was only trying to help! No good deed goes unpunished, etc.

But wait! The perfect opportunity to ingratiate myself to Sigfus arises when I loudly, if unsobly, praise his forgiving nature at court. It works. Huzzah! I'll get everybody to recognise me as the kind and pious ruler that I am if it's the last thing I do. And, considering the fact that I'm now 70 years old and it's the 11th century, maybe it *will* be the last thing I do. I return home, chuffed that I've added Sigfus to my list of friends. My wife

Caisséne further brightens my mood by announcing that she is pregnant! Again! That'll be child number three within a few short years. The more the merrier, I say. After all, the good book doth say go forth and multiply, and at this rate I'll be a multiplication pro.

Once the standard nine-month cooking time has passed, my daughter is born. I name her after Caisséne, so that she may serve as a living reminder to my wife not to remarry after my death. I took a similar approach with the naming of my other two children, and I'm really starting to run out of ideas.

THE ICONOCLAST

I've barely had time to think of my first excuse to avoid changing the nappies when I'm visited by my spies. Ah yes; several years ago, I started a scheme to abduct Duke Halfdan of Mercia because

he converted to Iconoclasm, and I'm desperate to save his soul. The trap is ready to be sprung! There's a 95 percent chance of failure, but the lord God is on my side, so I order my agents to bring him to me.

My plot is exposed, and Halfdan remains a heretic.

I'm having a particularly bad day, because I then receive word that my good friend Yosi – who I assigned to the position of marshal – has yet again let bandits run wild for another five years. Hmm, perhaps I should consider giving this position to somebody qualified instead of trying to keep my mate happy.

With impeccable timing, noted expert in marshalling, Gausberto (he just has one name, like Madonna), visits. I recruit him to my court, and swap him out for Yosi. I'm sorry, Yosi! I'll find you something else to do, my friend. But first, I must start a murder plot against Halfdan. This is fine to do because a) he's a heretic, and b) as I'm such a good Catholic in God's good graces now, I'll just pray for him and save his soul that way.

THERE'S A 95% CHANCE OF FAILURE, BUT THE LORD GOD IS ON MY SIDE



THE PLEBS *An average Crusader Kings III crowd*



1 Wise, pious, almost certainly cheating on his wife.

2 Kind, shy, generous, destined to be brutally murdered.

3 Selfish, greedy, quick to anger, destined to prosper.

4 Money. Cash. Moolah. Worshipped by people of all faiths.

➤ That, at least, was the plan. On October 6 1078, Jarl Isleifur dies of old age at 72, and the murder plot dies with him. It seems that he was such a good Catholic, God simply couldn't wait any longer to meet him. I now play as his son Teitur, who has lurked in the background without doing very much (the lazy sod) but is keen to follow his father's example.

After (presumably) mourning the death of my father, I sit back and consider the land that I've inherited. Dad was a good man, but is prioritising courtesy, friendliness and piety above all else really the best way to go? We lost no land during his reign, nor did we gain any. It was nice to see him make a friend in his twilight years, but putting that friend in the council to keep him close led to bandits running all over the place. Repeatedly. And now, I find that Yosi has a low opinion of me! It was probably my fault for doubting my father. I promise myself I will continue to walk in his well-meaning footsteps.

Yosi meant a lot to my dad, so I put him back on the council as steward. I don't want to undo all that hard work to get Sigfus on-side, either, so I make him

chancellor. He's greedy, but calm and honest, which is a good combination for the position, maybe...?

DAGNABBIT

My son Dag is only six years old, but he's already a gambler, so I officially make him my ward in order to bring him up right. I'll make dad proud. Significantly, underage gambling isn't the biggest family revelation, though. I learn (remember?) that I have no mother. I don't mean that she's dead; I mean that, according to the family tree, *I have no mother*. It all comes back to me now, that day I tried to have The Talk with my father. "Dad,

where do babies come from?", I asked. "I don't know," he replied, before bursting into tears. I think my step-mother Caissène must have taught him eventually though.

To my dismay, I find that Caissène has a very low opinion of me. Come on, Caiss! You know dad would want us to get along! I give her a job as spymaster, and start a scheme to sway her. Fortunately, this doesn't take long to work, and I like to think that she lets me call her 'mother'. I imagine dad looking down on us and smiling, as he shares another flagon of mead with his best mate God. I am in fact constantly aware of dear old dad looking down on everything that I do, and vow to impress him from here on out.

I'm minding my own business, praying in between saying kind words to people that pass by, when little Dag comes up to have a word. He's heard of a thief that's been sentenced to death, and doubts that God would approve. Naturally, I set him right, and inform him that God would very much approve. Thou shalt not steal, my boy, it's right there in The Ten Commandments! And if you think God wouldn't approve of the death sentence, you wait until I teach you about what he did to Job just to win a bet with Satan.

Uneventful weeks pass by, with the people poor but content, and me complimenting people on their shoes and whatnot, when suddenly, alas! A peasant rabble gathers, and I receive word that they are targeting me. I give Yosi some side-eye – all those years of bandits running amok can't have helped – but I keep my counsel on the matter. See, dad? I am temperate and respectful of your friend.

In the midst of my preparations for a potential civil war, there is scandal at the court. Sigfus has been caught cheating on his wife! Cad! Villain! *Unchivalrous rogue!* This will not stand. I immediately place him under arrest. That'll teach him for putting his soldier in another woman's regiment. I look up at the sky, and give my dad a hearty thumbs up.

I've only just finished patting myself on my chivalrous back when things take a rather unexpected turn. You would think, perhaps, that Sigfus' wife would call me many unkind names for placing her husband under arrest. Instead, she takes the first available opportunity to flirt heavily with me, making it clear that she wishes me to... ah... enter her court. Shameless strumpet! I would never cheat on my wife, least of all with the unprincipled likes of her!

I make sure to shame her as publicly as possible. I don't imprison her, as this reaction to her husband's arrest suggests that she has a thing for handcuffs, and I don't want to give her the satisfaction. I see a long line of middle-aged men asking for this woman of loose morals' name and address so that they can be sure to avoid her.





Then, as if I didn't have enough to deal with, Yosi challenges my authority in front of the court. I'm sorry dad, but I've put up with enough from this guy! I shout him down, which is stressful, but I don't get any more trouble from him. I feel guilty for treating him unkindly, but did not Jesus Christ himself show anger against the money changers? And anyway, he started it.

RABBLE, RABBLE

The peasant rabble are still unhappy, and deliver an ultimatum: the oiks aren't happy about taxes. I'm in a bad mood thanks to Yosi, so quickly refuse their demands. As a result, I almost immediately die in a siege. A sudden and undignified death for a man who was just trying to make the world a better place.

So now I'm Dag, and my world is a dark place. At just 13, I shouldn't have much more to worry about than my bed hovering a few feet above the floor thanks to all the issues of Uncannily Fair Maidens Weekly shoved underneath it. Instead, I'm in charge of a land under siege.

It's not long before my mum, nanny Caisséne, and one of my brothers are all killed. So I do the only reasonable thing and retreat to a corner to weep in peace.

When the peasants directly threaten me, I cave in to their demands – I saw how not doing so worked out for dad – and, thankfully, they disband. My land stagnates somewhat through following the family tradition of unambitious chivalry until, at the age of 18, I die at the paws and jaw of a wolf. Although my spymaster was with me at the time, and could have dealt with the situation better, she is but a woman. My medieval chivalry proved to be my undoing. It's probably for the best, to be honest, as I'd grown some facial hair that

I REFUSE THEIR DEMANDS AND ALMOST IMMEDIATELY DIE IN A SIEGE

looked absolutely ridiculous.

So, what did I learn? Strict adherence to a moral code is great for making friends, and meting out righteous justice is fun; but it turns out you have to be a bit of a bastard sometimes if you want to... well... continue being alive. Heaven better be good after all I've been through. ■





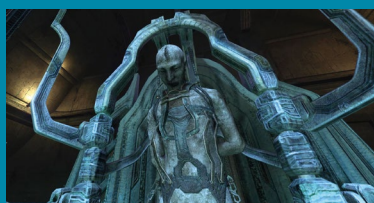
WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

PRESSING X TO COMFORT
MY UNBORN CHILD IN

AMNESIA: REBIRTH

We've come a long way from pressing
F to pay respects. *By James Davenport*



LEFT: There's no smile key, sadly.

RIGHT: Talking to the babe acts like a hint system sometimes, too.



A *mnesia: Rebirth* casts you as Tasi Trianon, a young explorer with a rough case of amnesia. Big surprise. Besides bobbing and weaving around cosmic horrors, getting your memories back is the top goal here. Early on, you'll recall the tragic fate of some loved ones and chip away at the extra tragic local colonial history. But soon enough Tasi will gather enough memory scraps to piece together a particularly big one: she's four months pregnant.

Tasi's pregnancy isn't marginalised, stowed away for certain cutscenes and story beats. As the player you will need to literally babysit, pressing a button to make Tasi hold her belly to feel and listen for her unborn child. I'm not very far into *Rebirth*, but the simple existence of a 'Press X to check fetus' system already gives the horror new dimensions.

Sure, it sounds goofy without context, and immediately brings to mind *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare's* infamous 'Press F to pay respects' scene. But that moment is an empty gesture – you don't spend the next ten hours pressing F to salute soldiers to maintain your Respect stat. It's a button prompt that effectively turns the page. *Amnesia* makes its baby button prompt a lever you can pull at any time, and for good, spooky reasons.

I would tell you exactly how the baby button works, but the key here is that the explicit function of the baby button isn't really explained. I only put together how it works through play. *Rebirth* is leading with action and theme: you're pregnant, protect the baby. It's mum roleplay.

All I know is that checking in on your baby restores a bit of sanity

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
October, 2020

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

OUR REVIEW
91%

LINK
bit.ly/35ZxJ10

PRESS TOUR A recent history of weird button prompts



To incessantly scream
"Jason!",
Heavy Rain
(2010)



To hide in a mass grave,
Homefront
(2011)



To shut up Starscream,
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron
(2012)



To kiss your wife,
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor (2014)



To pay respect
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare
(2014)



To time travel,
Titanfall 2
(2016)

whenever the screen flashes blue to signify a kick, an interesting alternative to finding or making light or solving a puzzle. It might seem odd to give the player a free, super accessible sanity pump, but if you're put into a position where finding light or fleeing aren't an option, standing still to clutch your unborn child just so you don't go insane means you're close to done for already. It's a desperation button, and one that's elegantly integrated into the story and character. Now you have a legitimate systems-driven directive to roleplay a mother in a horrifying situation.

MOTHER SPACE

It's nicely positioned next to *Amnesia's* fear system, too, in which the character's grip on reality is expressed through camera control and visual fidelity. Those are both hindered and obscured by ambient threats like standing in darkness, or looking at horrific scenes and monsters. The way you manoeuvre a space, where you're looking, and how dark it is affect your fear, while more traditional physical threats affect your person. And in *Rebirth* your person is a person within a person, a health bar you feel and care about.

I know I care because I catch myself checking on the little one all the time, even if I'm not succumbing to fear. Controlling a pregnant character makes me feel more fragile and makes me pay more attention to her presence in a space, even if Tali moves and controls like most other first-person horror protagonists. After

a sprint into safety or a tumble down some rocks in the pitch darkness of a deep subterranean cave, I instinctively hold X to see how the baby is doing, not because my sanity is slipping. But even as I'm walking around a safe outdoor area I'll listen in purely out of curiosity.

The unreliable perspective has me a bit scared of the baby too, though. Given Tali's amnesia, I can't fully trust what she's seeing and hearing. It could very well burst out of my chest in the third act Alien-style, a mangled monster-demon from another dimension. Maybe it's not actually there at all. Is it just a coping

GIVEN TALI'S AMNESIA, I CAN'T FULLY TRUST WHAT SHE'S SEEING AND HEARING

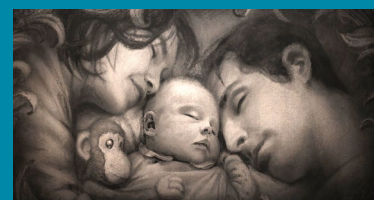
mechanism imagined by Tali or, far worse, the directed hallucination of some cosmic force steering me towards its incomprehensible goal?

While it might sound needlessly complicated when you're already worried about running out of lantern oil and matches or the monster scraping at the door, checking in on the baby doesn't feel like a chore. It's the prime directive. It's what I care most about and somehow my greatest fear. That's just good game design: thematic camouflage for the numbers and stats and resources directing the game systems that I trust without question. Now all I have to do is find the courage to see it all through. ■



LEFT: Time for a check-in!

RIGHT: This isn't Tali's first child.





I defeated this boss by clicking on it once and then eating rabbit sandwiches.

RUNESCAPE

Nearly two decades old, it has never stopped growing. *By Tyler Wilde*

In 2001 *RuneScape* launched as a browser game and never stopped moving forward, depositing old versions along the way for players who wanted to stay in the past: *RuneScape Classic*, which no longer exists, and then *Old School RuneScape* in 2013. For everyone else, the modern version is just called *RuneScape*, and was recently added to Steam. I've always had the sense that *RuneScape* is a bit esoteric (I'm sure I tried it back when it launched, when I was into MUDs and other relics of online gaming), but I didn't realise just how weird the free-to-play MMO is until I gave it a try. Nearly two decades after it first released, visiting *RuneScape* is like entering a PC gaming pocket dimension that

split off from our own years ago, perhaps accessed by passing through the infinite loop of a GeoCities webbrink.

Like any other MMO, *RuneScape* begins with character creation, and I design a bearded man with a bald-on-top monk cut. I have no name in mind for him, so I opt to let *RuneScape* generate a random one. I'm expecting it to hit me with something fantasy-ish, like Illhard Earling or Haglbar or Revvyn. It suggests Deathlum1934. I hit the randomise button again. 59Bork2396. Again. Dingo2429. 44slender392.

Clearly, randomised names are not *RuneScape's* strength. No problem: I type in the name of German author WG Sebald. It tells me that someone has already taken the name WG Sebald. Who could possibly be

running around *RuneScape* as German literary figure WG Sebald? I don't know, but the game's been around for nearly 20 years now, so I should've figured that no niche would be untouched. I type in Burrp Bram and the name is accepted. I am now Burrp Bram.

In the tutorial area, I learn there's a skill called Prayer and that burying the bones of my slaughtered enemies will increase my Prayer skill. Later, those enemies include innocent tutorial bunnies that I stab to death with a dagger and make sandwiches out of, innocent tutorial cows that I pierce with arrows while they helplessly bustle about a pen, trolls who live in caves directly beneath the town, gelatinous abominations, and some skeletons, who were presumably buried at one time, and now need to be reburied. I bury all their bones, even the bones of the gelatinous abominations, which

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2001

DEVELOPER
Jagex

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
runescape.com



RECURSIONS *Two decades of betas, renamings, and rereleases*



somehow have bones. I level up my Prayer skill in the process, although I don't bother to learn what Prayer actually does. I've never been very patient with tutorial text.

MEETING DEATH

When *EverQuest* launched, my favourite thing to do was explore the world with low-level characters, danger be damned. It was about the adventure, not the grinding, and I'm

happy to discover that *RuneScape* offers the same freedom. I quickly brush aside all of the tutorial work I was supposed to do, despite barely understanding the arcane, semi-automated combat system and spell rune economy (in those respects, *RuneScape* feels very much like a game that's been under construction for 20 years), and just start walking. Almost immediately, I run into Death himself, skeletal and floating.

He turns out to be a nice guy – clearly hanging out as part of a Halloween event – and he informs me that at the beginning of every hour there's a chance it'll become a 'spooky hour', which increases XP earned. I think that could be true of life, too. Maybe you're in a spooky hour right now. Feels like it.

Death also gives me my first real quest, handing me a crystal that he says will guide me to lost souls that need to be defragmented. That's the word he uses: 'defragment'. Like they're hard drives. I think that souls these days really ought to be stored on SSDs, but I run off to the Barbarian Village to the north to defragment my first one. I'm kind of worried the identical blonde barbarians will attack me, but they just mill around with spears while I chase down a glowing soul dot and click on it to heal it. As I do, my mind is "flooded with images of axes, blood, and fists". And then, when I've nearly finished defragmenting the soul, my mind is "filled with pictures of a burial, fires and a trial". Ostensibly, this is a game for kids.

After saving the soul – but not through Prayer, interestingly – I



At some point, every MMO character finds himself mining some tin.



In some places it's illegal to use such an intense lava glow effect.



decide to move on from Death's task (clicking on a glowing dot is not all that fun, actually) and go further north. I arrive at the ruins of a wall, and when I try to cross it, *RuneScape* warns me that I'm entering the Wilderness, where other players can attack me. I have nothing to lose, so I hop in. I admire a river of lava, and then run further north and get killed by ranged attacks from a beast I hardly get a look at. I nearly survive by eating all of my rabbit sandwiches as I run away, but not quite.

YETI TROUBLE

After I respawn, I figure I'm wasting my time and I ought to just go back to the first town and play the game properly, focusing on levelling. But the big unexplored map calls to me, so I start travelling east and eventually I do discover something: a little girl sitting outside of a portal. When I talk to her, she bolts through the magic gateway.

The ground on the other side of the portal is covered with untouched snow. A forest of evergreens goes on forever. Violet, the kid, starts rolling Indiana Jones-style balls of snow down a hill at me. I have to run up

the slope while avoiding the enormous snowballs, which is difficult because movement is done by clicking on a destination, and my character likes to complete movement one axis at a time rather than taking diagonal paths. After several attempts, I make it to the top and Violet runs away. I'm curious, now. I'd assumed that only high-level players could survive a mysterious portal adventure, so I'd expected to

die near instantly at the hands of a Yeti or some other monster.

It turns out there are two Yetis in the snow world, but they don't want to kill me. A minute later, I'm standing in their house talking with them about their adopted human daughter, who's sulking about a Yeti festival she's not allowed to attend. Violet's parents are worried the other Yeti kids at the festival will make fun of her because she's a human. For

BURRP'S TRAVELS

A little jaunt through a big world

1 LUMBRIDGE
Full of peaceful goblins and spiders. Some humans.

2 DRAYNOR MANOR
Met Death here. Learned about 'spooky hours'.



3 BARBARIAN VILLAGE

Three identical blonde women with spears marched around me in a circle. Defragmented a soul.

4 WILDLANDS
Should have turned around when I saw the rivers of lava. Died.

5 LAND OF SNOW PORTAL
There's probably some kind of bizarre Yeti-related quest on the other side of this.



IT KIND OF FEELS LIKE I'M UNDERGOING SOME KIND OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION

some reason, Yeti dad will only let her attend if I go with them. From here on, it kind of feels like I'm undergoing some kind of psychological evaluation.

Our first obstacle is a dark stretch of trees that Violet refuses to traverse due to the possibility it contains monsters. We can't move forward until I find a way to create some light for her. I shake a bush and a firefly emerges. I click on the firefly to catch it in my hands, and then I give it to Violet. She immediately eats it.

According to Violet, fireflies taste like "popping candy" and provide a "warm feeling" in her tummy, and I'm assured that any further fireflies I hand to her will be instantly eaten. She is simply unable to square her desire for light with her desire to eat fireflies, so I have to come up with a new solution. It's pretty simple: just make a spigot, stick it into a maple tree, collect maple syrup in a bucket,

spread the syrup on trees along the path, ask Violet's dad for an empty bottle (this took me forever to figure out, but I wonder if a kid would instinctively ask the adult for help?), fill the bottle with fireflies, and then give the bottle to Violet so that she can let the fireflies out as we walk. The theory is that the fireflies will not be eaten by Violet because they are in a bottle, but they will be attracted to the maple syrup on the trees rather than flying away, providing a steady source of light.

After that, we encounter a group of ice elementals, and I think, here we go, a combat encounter that'll surely kill me because I haven't levelled at all, but no, that's not the case. I have to build snowman heads that match Violet's facial expressions and then help her throw them onto the elementals, because they have no heads of their own, and she refuses to leave them headless.

STRANGE OLD WORLD

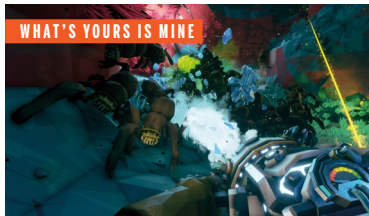
It turns out that Violet's quest was added as part of the 2018 Christmas event. These things are just left behind for new players to discover – not like *Destiny 2* and *World of*

Warcraft and other games, which are culled and streamlined. My chance meeting with Death? It turns out his full name is Harold Death, Esq. and he doesn't just show up for the week of Halloween. He lives in a big mansion where he frequently kills servants accidentally, due to his touch of death. I said that *Runescape's* combat systems feel like they've been under construction for 20 years – well, so does the rest of *Runescape*. (Except maybe the graphics, though they have been.)

In some ways, *Runescape* feels like a precursor to *Fortnite* – they've both built up a patchwork of lore over time, and theoretically being 'for kids' hasn't stopped them from being weird, complex, and sometimes unsettling (that poor barbarian soul). But *Fortnite* will be carefully manicured in the way live service games are these days, and I doubt it'll ever be allowed to grow gnarled, tangled fingernails quite like *Runescape*, which you'll recall involves performing religious burials. The idea of holding funerals for fallen enemies in *Fortnite* was a ClickHole joke. Two decades after it launched, *RuneScape* is still ahead of its time. ■

ROBIN
VALENTINE

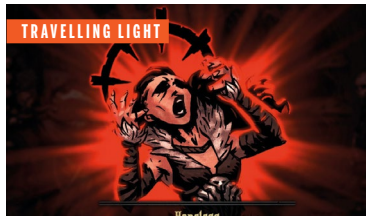
Fitting gaming into my schedule looks tough in 2021. Where are you supposed to find the time around all the staring at the walls and internal panicking you have to get done these days?



DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

deeprockgalactic.com

→ I think this is one of the most engrossing and layered co-op games to come out in years – basically *Left 4 Dead* meets *No Man's Sky*. The procedurally generated levels are a constant test of your ability to adapt and improvise, and they never seem to stop finding ways to surprise me.



DARKEST DUNGEON

darkestdungeon.com

→ Five years on from its original launch, I still love going back to this bleak dungeon crawler. I just never get tired of its atmosphere – the grim narrator's endless pessimistic commentary on your doomed excursions makes me smile every time. Lovecraftian horror done right, for once.



CRUSADER KINGS III

crusaderkings.com/en

→ After hundreds of hours in the second game, I was actually worried this sequel wouldn't feel different and fresh enough to draw me in. I couldn't have been more wrong – it's full of subtle changes that rejuvenate the formula. I'm hooked on the medieval Jerry Springer simulator all over again.



HADES

supergiantgames.com/games/hades

→ For years I'd been evangelising the Early Access version of this to not much success, so it was surreal seeing it blow up so much once it hit 1.0. I'm just glad it finally got its proper time in the spotlight. A Roguelike this clever, beautiful, and compelling sets a new high bar for the entire genre.

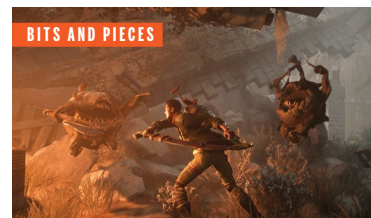
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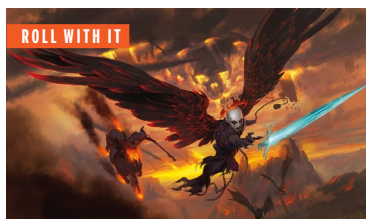
→ This is a great example of a game that's much more than just the sum of its parts. Almost everything in it is essentially cribbed from other games – *Dark Souls* and *Destiny* especially – but it all comes together into a thrilling, ambitious co-op experience across a bizarre world I loved puzzling over.



TABLETOP SIMULATOR

tabletopsimulator.com

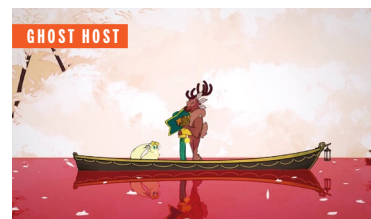
→ I've relatively recently gotten into board games in a big way, but my timing couldn't be worse – suddenly I can't meet up to play with people. *Tabletop Simulator*'s been a fantastic solution. I especially recommend the official (and free) Unmatched module for exciting duels between the likes of Bigfoot and King Arthur.



D&D BEYOND

dndbeyond.com

→ Alright, so it's not strictly a PC game, but this website's virtual character sheets have been a godsend for lockdown-era remote Dungeons & Dragons. It handles rolls, works out all your modifiers and effects for you, provides rules references, and lets you track things like XP and HP with ease.



SPIRITFARER

thunderlotusgames.com/spiritfarer

→ This indie adventure takes such a sweet and beautiful approach to its remarkably heavy topics, complete with big hugs and emotional heart-to-hearts. It's a bit overlong to be sure, but at the same time I love that it feels more substantial and involved than you'd ever expect from this style of game.



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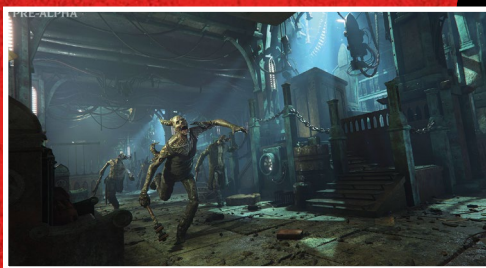
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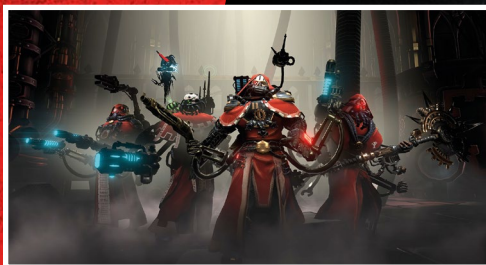
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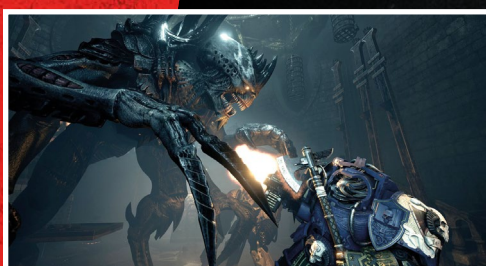
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